

On·Spec

SUMMER 2000

\$5.95

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DISPLAY UNTIL OCT. 1, 2000



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On Spec is published quarterly through the volunteer efforts of the Copper Pig Writers' Society, a nonprofit society. Annual subscriptions are \$18.00 for individuals and \$25.00 for institutions. (Price includes GST. GST # 123625295.) For US and overseas rates, see p. 26. Send SASE for advertising rate card, contributors' guidelines, payment schedule, and complete back issue details.

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Publication and promotion of this issue have been made possible by financial assistance from Alberta Community Development, Cultural Industries Branch; The Alberta Foundation for the Arts; The Canada Council for the Arts; the Department of Canadian Heritage; Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development; and Clear Lake Ltd.

On Spec is a member of the Canadian Magazine Publishers' Association (CMPA) and the Alberta Magazine Publishers' Association, and is distributed by CMPA and BBR (U.K.).

Typesetting and layout in PageMaker on a Macintosh PowerPC by Jena Snyder.
Body typeface is Baskerville. Headline typeface is Korinna.
Printed in Canada by Alpine Press Limited.

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Summer 2000

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COVER:

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The donors listed below have all given generously in the past year. We are grateful for their support.

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BEHIND THE SCENES SUPPORT:

The continued success of ON SPEC is possible only because of the generous donation of time and assistance from wonderful people such as:

Jane Bisbee, Judy Hayman, and Vern Thiessen of Alberta Community Development and Alberta Foundation for the Arts; Colin Bamsey and Tobey Morris of Clear Lake Ltd.; Merrill Distad and Randy Reichardt of the University of Alberta Library; Tanya Huff; David Macpherson of Advance Graphic Art Services Ltd.; Donna McMahon; Robert Runté; Bill Williams of Alpine Press Ltd.; Edward Willett.

Financial support provided by
the **Alberta Foundation for the Arts**, a beneficiary of Alberta Lotteries



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Frontispiece:

"There Ain't No Strings on Me" (page 27) illustration by Ronn Sutton

On this issue...

ConSpec 2K

Jena Snyder, General Editor

I'M SORRY TO SAY THAT THE EXECUTIVE BOARD OF the Copper Pig Writers' Society (the publishers of *On Spec*) and the ConSpec conference organizers have decided, with great regret, to cancel ConSpec 2K.

There were several things that combined to make it difficult, if not impossible, to run ConSpec this year. Although we had the funding in place to cover speaker expenses, we still needed a certain number of registrations to make the event pay. We were encouraged by advance registrations, but given the choice of putting on a bare-bones, low-budget event or offering attendees and guests the best experience possible, we decided it would be better to wait, and do it right. With approval from our granting agencies, we will be banking year 2000 grant money for a year 2001 event instead.

Registration fees will be the same as previously advertised, and we would appreciate your advance support of ConSpec 2K1. Early Bird registrations will be \$30 until March 31, 2001.

We know you were looking forward to joining us at ConSpec, and we are very sorry for any inconvenience this may have caused. Please accept our apologies.

Sincerely,

Jena Snyder, General Editor, *On Spec*
for the Copper Pig Writers' Society and *On Spec*

On the business of writing...

A dangerous world

Derryl Murphy

Canadian Regional Director, SFWA

ALTHOUGH NOT EVERYONE WHO READS *ON SPECIS* is a writer, many of our readers are. Some are well-established, if not making a living at least aware of how to look out for themselves as a writer. Others are newer at this game, and it is primarily to them, as well as anyone out there who harbors hopes of someday becoming a writer, that this is addressed.

It's a dangerous world out there for writers, with legal language that can confuse you and possibly kill your chance of making real money from a story, with predators and know-nothings and even people who are honest, but still intend to make sure they get the better end of any business deal with you. And so you may eventually find yourself at the critical point where you need help to navigate these waters. You need an agent.

Excellent idea. But how does one go about getting an agent? You have probably heard that the vast majority of them won't take on clients until they've already succeeded, as in sold a novel. In some cases, they'll even want to wait until your next novel is either done or an offer has been made for it. This can really eat at a writer's patience, let me tell you. You've already established a bit of a name for yourself as a short story author, you've finished that first novel, but all the publishing houses that you're interested in trying are either not open to un-agented manuscripts or else they have slush piles that look like they could fill up Scrooge McDuck's money bin.

Ah, but there's a way to make this all less daunting, you discover. While perusing the web/a writer's magazine/a convention program you find an ad for a new agent. Someone who claims to be hungry for business, someone who promises you their full attention because they don't have any big name clients eating up their time. Because, of course, if I were Stephen King's agent, why would I spend my time dealing with trying to sell Joe Newbie's first novel? Fifteen percent of a guaranteed few million bucks vs.

fifteen percent of anywhere from zero to six grand. Hmm.

You take the plunge. An email is sent off, and soon a response comes back: *Yes, please, send along your manuscript. But please note that we have a series of fees that we have to charge up front. First off is the reading fee, and I hope you will understand that because of the quantity of manuscripts we have to read, this is something we need you to pay.*

Nonsense. Every reputable agent should be paid only by commission from the sale of your work. It is their job, their career on the line here, and the way a reputable agent should be making money is by making you money. Remember, if someone has already made their money from you before they send out your work, they have much less incentive to even bother to submit it. In those rare cases where work is submitted, it has been known to go to inappropriate publishers, i.e., the romance writer whose work went everywhere *except* romance publishers.

Keep in mind that office fees and any other related in-house expenses fall under this umbrella as well. At the very worst, some extraordinary expenses will be taken out of a writer's earnings. This is a business the agent runs, after all, and usual costs are a part of doing that business. That's why we all have accountants, right?

These problems are not always things that fall into the realm of the thief. Often, agents who charge fees like these are clueless or new or both. "Hey, I have something of a talent as a writer/editor/pushy salesperson, so I think I'll rep a few of my friends."

Sadly, new and hungry for the work doesn't qualify as an effective substitute for business savvy and experience, even if you do end up being part of a larger stable. And in many cases, the fees that are charged can lead to other things that will cost the author more time, more money, and even large doses of self-respect.

More things to avoid: referrals to outside editing services (this is almost always a scam involving kickbacks or else editing services owned by the referring party); evaluation fees, in which the agent will charge you an amount for a few pages worth of ruminations on what you could do better (that's an editor's job); any talk of a sale to an obvious vanity press, or for that matter any publisher that does not pay an advance (there are very likely exceptions to be made in this dawning world of print on demand, but I see none for a first novel); agents who are unable or unwilling to show you a client or sales list (no agent should be afraid of producing a verifiable track record).

There are more, I know, but time and space are limited here. I recommend www.sfw.org, the excellent website for the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. When there, click on either "Writer Beware" or "Predators and Editors" (the misspelling is deliberate).

In the meantime, take heart in the story of one of my co-editors here at *On Spec*, Peter Watts. Peter wrote quality work, caught the interest of an editor with a reputable publisher, sent in his novel, and sold it. *Then* he got an agent, who helped him make his second sale. ♣

Congratulations!
On Spec Short Story Contest Winners:

FIRST PRIZE of \$500 goes to
KAIN MASSIN for "Wrong Dreaming"

SECOND PRIZE of \$350 goes to
SIOBHAN CARROLL for "A Killer of Men"

THIRD PRIZE of \$250 goes to
R.W.C. SYLVESTER for "Getting Pissed With the Minotaur"

HONORABLE MENTIONS (in alphabetical order):

SHAWN BRAYMAN for "Io You"

LESLIE BROWN for "Preserving the Species"

LISA CARREIRO for "Diva"

ROBYN HERRINGTON for "Just a Passenger"

EDWARD HOORNAERT for "Devil, Devil"

JAMES KEENAN for "Cowboy Bill"

WILMA KENNY for "The Wedding"

STEVE MOHN for "Not Plowed or Sanded in Winter"

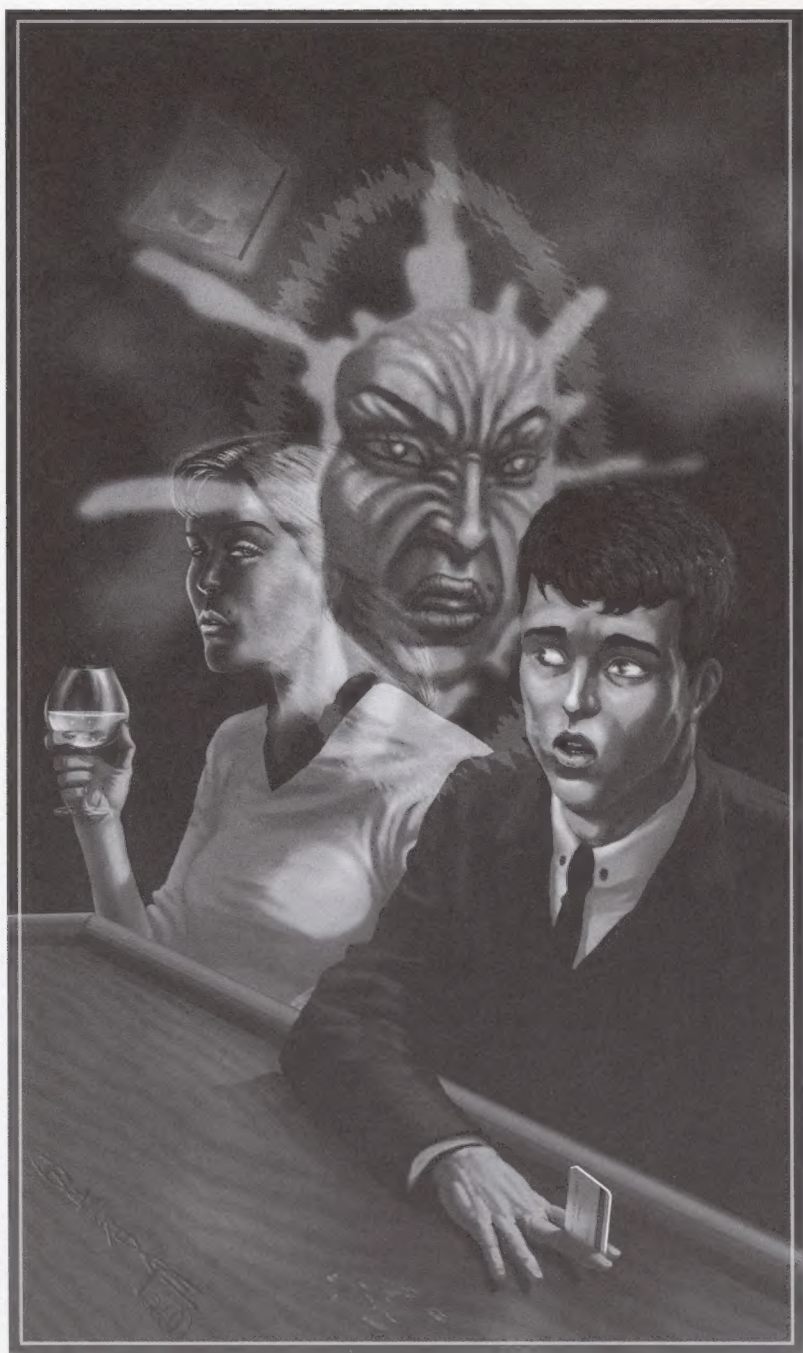
CARL SIEBER for "Jack Be Nimble"

HAYDEN TRENHOLM for "Tempus Fugitive"

ELIZABETH WESTBROOK for "Prize"

Congratulations to all of our winners!

All finalist stories will be published in the special fall double-issue of *On Spec*. Many thanks to all authors who entered, and very special thanks to our hard-working judge, Tanya Huff. 🍁



Understanding

L. E. Modesitt, Jr.

illustrated by James Beveridge

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND." I WAS STANDING IN THE space that separated the breakfast bar from the rest of the kitchen. "You liked getting laid as much as I do."

"Randy..." Cyane shook her head, looking from her stool across the remnants of her omelet. I do make a good omelet. "You harbor the notion that you are irresistible to women. And...you could be considered good-looking and intelligent." She shrugged. "That's not enough. You're also a pig."

"Not even a hog?" I thought a laugh might help, but she didn't even smile. "Anyway, what are you talking about? First Jennifer, then Renni, and now you." Not much time before I had to leave. It takes me twenty-four minutes to run to the health club across from my office at Environment. Then I do a quick routine with the Nautilus. Keeps the shoulders broad and the stomach trim. Women like men with flat guts.

"You refuse to understand the truth." That accented voice still sent shivers down my spine.

"All of you act as though men are some sort of monsters."

Cyane just smiled that enigmatic smile and took another sip of water. She never drank anything but water, and she was a strict vegetarian, but what the hell, the way Cyane had made me feel, she could eat or drink whatever she wanted. Until she told me she was leaving.

"You're so damned superior. Sometimes, you make me want to puke. 'Don't you think you ought to drop your mother a card?' So I do, and it turns out that it arrives on their anniversary, and she calls thanking me for being so thoughtful and understanding." I took a deep breath. "Or your suggestion about the lines in the speech for the Secretary. 'Brilliant idea, Randy.' Or the business about the marsh grass being the wrong species. Or

10 Understanding

the suggestion for using Russian olives on the Secretary's project. So you gave me some lucky ideas—big deal."

"You weren't complaining when you got the promotion and the praise," my nymph, or former nymph, observed, brushing a strand of that black hair back over her ear.

"Where the hell did this business of leaving come from?"

She shrugged. "I've told you a dozen different ways. You still don't hear. You smile that practiced and charming smile and think everyone will forgive you..."

I admit I have a good smile. Both Jennifer and Renni liked it.

"Some...men I've known have been worse. But..." She paused before continuing. "...you are one of the most..." She took another sip of that Grecian spring water.

"For Christ's sake! I've heard the same crap from all three of you. 'You don't understand.' Understand what?"

Again, I got the damning smile for just an instant, as if she were toying with me.

"You're afraid of understanding yourself or women."

"Afraid?" I was angry by then. Afraid? After zapping that mugger the month before? I felt like I'd been set up. By three women right in a row. They start out really good in bed, and then they start talking understanding. Cyane was just the straw that broke this camel's back.

The days of the life-long marriages—like my parents'—are gone. And anyone can make a mistake when they get married at twenty-

one. I certainly did. Jennifer was just too willful and independent. I still spend a lot of time with the two girls.

After Jennifer left, I ran into Renni. She was interning with Congresswoman Hellenic, who had the office right across the hall from us. Then I was the Legislative Director for Matt Strauss—before he retired.

Within a year we were married. Same story, second verse, except it was quicker. Almost three years to the day, she walked out. By then I was the Committee Counsel for the Energy Committee. Renni said that it had been a mistake, that I'd never understand. Women and their damned understanding!

Cyane was different, and I should have known better when Renni introduced her to me. Renni had become a partner in Jane Helmam's law firm. It was a big deal at first, former Deputy Attorney General founds all-woman law firm. They have a couple of men there now, but they didn't to begin with.

The day I met Cyane, I'd stopped by to drop off some of Renni's papers. I could have mailed them, I suppose, but it was easier just to stop by. Besides, I had on the really good suit, and I wanted her to see what she was missing. She walked out with Cyane.

"Randy, this is Cyane. She's new here. I wanted you two to meet." She grinned at me. It was a funny kind of grin, one I didn't recognize. "She's from Greece, and I think she could teach you a lot about the things you love."

That had thrown me. Renni's last words when she left had been that

the only thing I loved was to get laid. I looked at the other woman, and smiled my most charming smile. "Nice to meet you, Cyane."

"Enchanted." There was a definite accent in the husky voice, and she smiled a kind of smile I'd never seen before and inclined her head.

I looked, and looked again. Hair so black it was almost blue, and eyes to match. Cream-colored skin, and a slightly pointed chin with a pixy nose above. Slim-waisted but with the extravagant curves I've always enjoyed seeing and—in the case of both Jennifer and Renni—touching. Then I smiled. She'd be worth something in bed. "No...I'm the one who's enchanted."

"Randy is always very gallant." Renni's voice had been hard.

"One can tell," Cyane answered, with another of her enigmatic smiles.

Of course, once Renni had disappeared, I asked Cyane out.

"You would like that?" she asked.

I would. So I said yes.

She was as good at what I liked as Renni had hinted, and within a week, she had moved in. Cyane never said much about the law firm, although I found out that she was some sort of research assistant. She even did a little work for me. That was when I finally was confirmed as the head of External Affairs for the Department. Me—Randy Ozier—the Honorable Randall Jains Ozier, Assistant Secretary of the Department of Environment. First step toward becoming a Cabinet Secretary or working in the White House. There was always something about the White House that's

fascinated me.

But Cyane was going. Just leaving. I was pissed, and then some. Where else would I find anyone that good in bed? And we made such a good couple at all the receptions. That's important, too, if you want to make it to the top of the political totem pole.

"Afraid?" I repeated.

"It's understandable." Her tone was condescending.

"If it's so damned understandable, kindly spell it out for poor dense Randall Ozier."

Cyane stood up. That was the funny thing. When she talked in that quiet, husky, and penetrating voice, you forgot she wasn't even quite five feet tall. "It's quite simple, Randy. You don't want to understand." Her eyes flashed, and I could have sworn that they changed from black to a deep clear blue for a moment.

"Understand what? You're talking garbage. And after all I've done for you."

"You're an Assistant Secretary for the Environment. You still haven't learned that women are not things. Even the *very* ancient Greeks knew that."

She acted like she'd been there. With the ancient Greeks, I mean.

"Show me what they knew." I tried another smile, but my eyes focused on her body.

Her lips quirked, this time in what seemed genuine amusement. But she didn't say a word, standing there, barefoot, in a plain white dress so simple it would have been in style a thousand years past or future.

"So...show me," I demanded.

She shrugged, again with the damned smile. "You asked." She stepped up to me, and said something I didn't catch, almost in a foreign language.

"What did you say?"

"Oh...the closest would be something like: 'Let this be done.'" She tilted her head back and put her arms around my neck.

I needed no further urging, but as our lips joined, the jolt that went through me was stronger than raw electric current. My knees almost buckled, and I steadied myself on the breakfast bar counter as Cyane stepped away.

"Goodbye, Randy. Just remember. You asked. You're not going to get what you want, you know. Not now."

"I'll get what I want, by God." Now she was really getting on my nerves.

"You might also remember what it would be like if someone the size of a Redskins' tackle forced himself on you." Then she made a funny gesture with her left hand, and a great big spark flew from her fingertips to my forehead.

When the second jolt cleared, the kitchen was empty. I looked into the bedroom, and all her things were gone, but she hadn't carried anything with her—not that I saw.

I shook myself. I was going to be late to work. So I ran faster and made it in twenty-one minutes. I did cut short my workout. But the whole time, for some reason, I thought about the last fight Renni and I had, the one where she slugged me because I wanted her

and wouldn't stop when she didn't. Of course, I'd pasted her back, and she had walked out the door. When I came home from work, all Renni's things were gone—just like Cyane's, I guess.

All through a very long morning, Cyane's words—and the 300-pound lineman—recycled themselves through my brain. Recycling may be good for the environment, but the words weren't wonderful for my peace of mind.

I ran home, right after all the bureaucrats left. I couldn't leave before they did. Running didn't help—not enough endorphins. Neither did reading—even the last couple of *Playboys*.

I kept imagining that the White House had asked for my resignation, and that I was begging my mother for a room to stay in, because no one would hire me. Then I dozed off, except I woke up yelling because some 300-pound lineman was trying to assault me. Finally, I got up and walked around and had a beer before going back to bed. I kept dreaming about being buggered by that 300-pound tackle. I took three of the tranquilizers that I had left over from the time I wrenched my back. At least I didn't dream any more that night.

The next morning, I was sitting behind the big desk on the tenth floor, looking out at the river, thinking about Cyane, and about women in general.

Women—they're an alien species. You think that they're sexy and human, but they're not. They're monsters.

At that point, Mort walked in.

Mort always struck me as a pleasant-enough guy, quiet-voiced. This time, behind the polite face, I could tell he was upset. Yet he didn't look that different.

"What's the matter, Mort?" I tried to keep my voice friendly, even soft.

"Not a thing." The anger seemed to boil around him. "I've got the latest hearing request from Chairman Hancock."

I nodded, waiting.

"It's next week."

Mort had planned a family vacation, and I could see his problem. He'd spent years defining himself by his work with the Committee, and he'd promised Jeannette and their kids they'd go to Disney-World. They'd planned the trip for months.

"That's tough," I finally said. "What do you want to do?"

"I hadn't thought about it." Now he was really angry. That I could tell, even though his voice hadn't risen in the slightest. He wanted me to make the choice for him.

"You've been planning the trip for too long. I'll handle the hearing for you."

His eyes turned hard. "This is an important hearing." Now he was angry, thinking I wanted to take over from him, that he might be pushed aside.

"Fine. Do what you think is best."

"Randy, what do you want me to do?" This time the anger was in his voice.

With all that fury directed at me, I was angry myself. No matter what I decided, Mort was going to be angry. "Do whatever you damned

well please," I snapped back. "You're not going to guilt-trip me and use me as the excuse with Jeannette or Jeannette as the excuse for me."

"You are..." He didn't say the rest of the words, because I was still the boss, but they were hanging on the air as if he had. "...one fucking bastard."

He did slam the door on the way out, but I scarcely noticed, because I was shaking all over at the fury I had felt Mort pouring out toward me. That worthless bastard!

Why hadn't I ever noticed how angry he was deep inside?

Buzz...

"Yes?" I picked up the intercom.

"The Secretary's office just called. He's called a meeting for eleven."

A scheduling change in mid-day meant trouble. But, as usual, I was there exactly on time. So were Blaine Coswell and Elena Sanford. He was the Assistant Secretary for Solid Waste and Emergency Response, and she was the Assistant Secretary for Research and Development.

"Chairman Hancock's called a hearing on the Bitterney Superfund site. He called me this morning. He wants all the drums removed and all the contaminated soil incinerated, plus a slurry wall all around the site to the depth of bedrock. Period." That was how the Secretary opened the meeting. Nils stayed behind the big desk with the view of the Potomac. I hate people who hide behind their desks, even when they are the Secretary of the Environment.

The three of us sat in comfortable

leather armchairs, lined up in a row.

"We could do that," admitted Blaine. His voice was tired, and I could sense frustration and anger behind the words. That and a blind cruel ambition that almost rocked me out of my seat. When he looked at the attractive scientist, his lust was enough to make me grit my teeth. He was such an animal he wouldn't even have appreciated her finer points. I looked sideways at Elena. Definitely a nice piece, for all the brains.

She caught my eyes and curled her lip, and I could feel a wave of total revulsion slide over me. I nearly gagged. Then I shook my head. Why was I sensing what everyone felt?

"You don't approve?" asked the Secretary.

"Uh... It's just a bad situation," I temporized. At least I recover quickly.

"It's not the safest method," offered Elena. The redheaded scientist had a doctorate in some branch of geology I couldn't even pronounce. "That was why we proposed on-site bio-remediation. We didn't want to create the possibility of greater contamination." The revulsion had subsided, and she conveyed a veiled contempt, a general disgust.

"What are the politics?" asked Secretary Lerison. It was as clear as the noonday sun that Nils would do whatever Chairman Hancock wanted. Nils wasn't looking for an answer, just a rationale, the spineless twerp.

"Well," I began, "the state attorney general has announced his

campaign against Hancock, and he's the one who pushed the lawsuit forcing the Bitterney cleanup to begin with."

"So Hancock wants to close off the issue with an immediate cleanup, no matter what the cost?" Lerison radiated relief that there might be a way out.

I nodded. "It looks that way." Then I made my second mistake of the day, or I guess it was the third, but the stupid emotions from both bastards and the disgust from that bitch Elena really set me off. "You have to choose between doing it right and doing it right away."

"I wish you hadn't put it quite that way, Randy." That was all the Secretary said. But if looks and thoughts could kill, I would have been dead.

I could feel Blaine gloating, even without a word, and that figured. After all, he had gotten the waste job because he had been so effective in rallying the environmental groups behind the President. He had really wanted to be Secretary, but the President's people blocked that.

Nils was seething, realizing that my statement, certain to be leaked to the press by Blaine, would put him in a no-win situation.

Elena smiled faintly and said softly, "We can support either option, Mr. Secretary. We did recommend the bio-remediation." She was vaguely pleased, the way an animal-rights lover might be when the bull got the matador.

We talked some more, without really saying anything. Then Nils asked me to stay a moment longer.

"If that statement of yours appears in the press, I'll hold you personally responsible. Do you understand?"

I understood, all right. I was dead. No more White House appointments, no more political jobs, no appointment even to a District Judgeship, not even an offer from a Washington law firm. No severance pay—that doesn't come with political jobs. No future.

By the time I got back to my office, Blaine would have leaked it in order to show how incompetent Nils was in dealing with Congress and cleanups. In turn, Nils would have to claim a foul-up in Congressional communications was responsible—which would be underscored by my resignation or, if I proved uncooperative, my dismissal.

That was Thursday. I resigned the following Monday, as events followed the pattern I had foreseen—except nastier. Blaine had also leaked that someone would be fired as an apology to the Chairman, and that was too much for the White House. So Blaine got fired, too. Or rather, he resigned a week or so later.

Some consolation!

In the meantime, I tracked down that bitch, Cyane. She'd started it all. Not that it was particularly hard, since she was staying with Renni. Cyane agreed to lunch—lunch only—and we met at Mortimer's.

Without a job and without any prospects, I probably couldn't afford Mortimer's, but the way things were going, I figured that I had a better chance if I offered her lunch at a classy place.

We arrived almost at the same time. Cyane wore the same white dress she had the day she had left me. Or one just like it. I took a deep breath, because she still took my breath away, and inclined my head to her. Damn, she'd been good in bed.

"Thank you." That was all she said. Unlike with Elena, or Rosalie, my secretary, I still couldn't sense what she felt.

As we stepped toward the little black podium, Jacques nodded to me, immediately. "Your table is ready, Mr. Ozier." Behind his words was a sense of regret.

I returned the nod. "Thank you, Jacques. I appreciate it."

Cyane and I said nothing until we were seated.

"Thank you for coming," I said.

"You don't mean that. But you were daring enough...or stupid enough...to ask."

Damn! Every feeling, every emotion I felt, was out there for her to read. She smiled, a bright, knowing smile, not the enigmatic one.

Over the salads—of course, Cyane's was vegetarian, and mine was Cajun chicken—I finally asked what I had in mind. "What did you do to me?"

Cyane put down her fork. Her deep black eyes looked older than hell, even in that beautiful smooth-skinned face. "I gave you what you asked for."

I took a deep breath. "What did I ask for?"

"Understanding."

Damned bitch! All I'd wanted was a bright and good lady in bed—and Cyane had been *very* good—and

now I was out of a job with nowhere to go. Maybe, if I were real lucky, I'd get a job doing dog-work legal research or chasing ambulances.

I took another bite of the suddenly tasteless salad. How can you think when you know the woman across from you understands every feeling you have? For some reason, I thought about the 300-pound tackle again and begging a room from my mother. What the hell was I going to do?

"Who...what are you?"

"I'm Cyane. My name is Greek, originally, from Sicily."

"From Sicily? That's bullshit."

Her eyes turned that stormy blue again. "Next time I won't be so gentle." Fire danced on her fingertips.

I was still pissed. "You're a witch, aren't you?"

She laughed softly, and I remembered all those nights. Then I looked at her face. It was like white marble, except marble's softer.

She hadn't answered the question. She wouldn't, either.

"I already have."

She answered the next question before I asked it.

"Because Renni asked me. Because I don't like men who force themselves on women. I haven't since...for a long time..."

And that was really all she said, except she was leaving the law firm. She didn't say where she was going, but it might have been back to Greece-Sicily. She'd been away a long time.

Cyane? Her name's in the

mythology books. Could be coincidence, but she was a nymph changed into a river. Or a fountain nymph outraged at the rape of Persephone. There are a couple of versions of the myth, but they all deal with nymphs and water. And my Cyane knew more about wetlands and water than anybody I ever met at Environment.

What will I do now? Do I really have much choice? I'm thinking about working as a consultant or a research associate for them. Jane Helmam's firm, that is. If not, I'll probably retreat to the old family house on the farmed-out forest in upstate New York. I mean, what else is there? For some reason, no guy will hire me. And at least, working around women, I'd be protected some. They're not quite as violent, just disgusted and contemptuous. Or revolted. The law firm bit's up to Renni, but that's all there is. And that's not real likely. Every other firm in Washington declined even to interview me. Cyane, again, but how she did it, I don't know. Maybe she screwed every single senior partner.

Hell of a note, when you think about it, but have you noticed how many estranged husbands are shooting themselves lately? Somehow, I don't think it's coincidence. I mean, how did the women get to be such monsters? All I wanted was a good lay. But who the hell's going to believe me?

Not all women know Cyane, but then again... 

Speed


Mici Gold

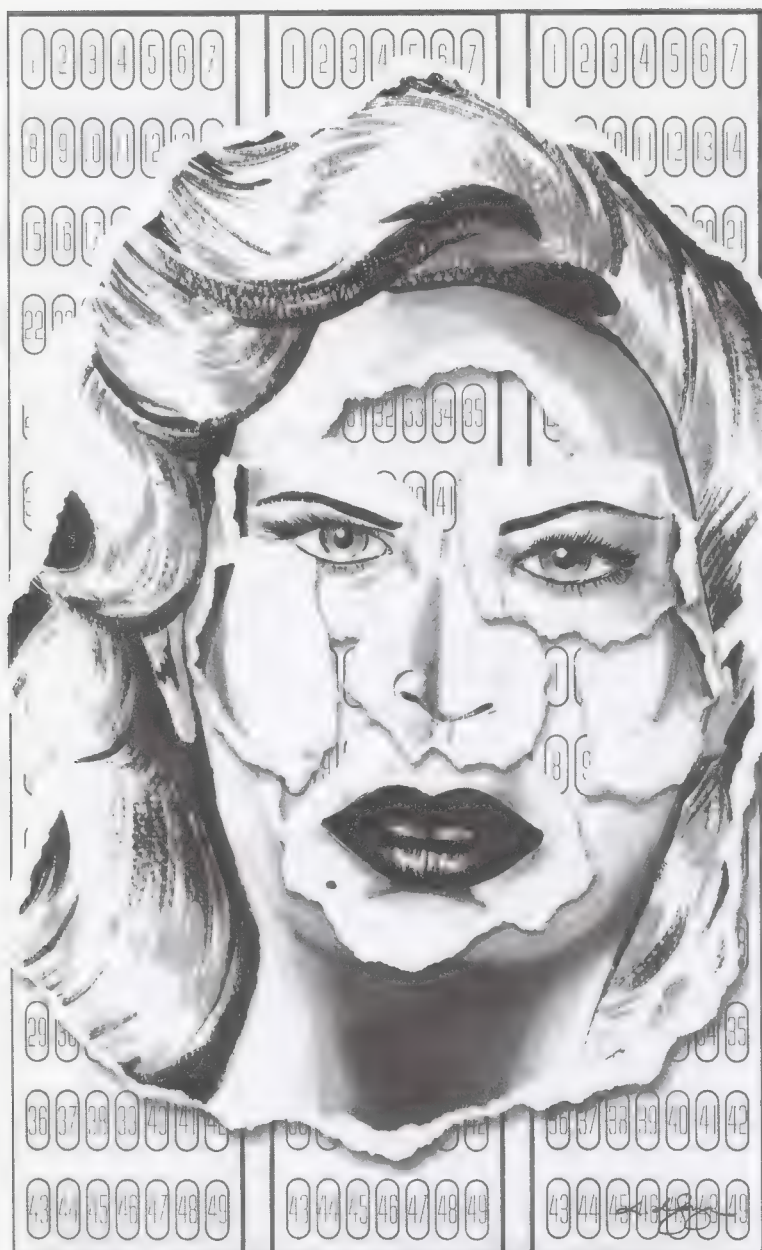
Time loops
bending around barriers
where I cannot divine
Years curve through space
and spiral down to earth
trapping me
in their tendrils

Moments tilt and
veer at random
like snowflakes
And the drifts flow away while
winter shapeshifts into spring
Yesterdays bleed into tomorrows
colors on the pallet
smeared by memory

I surf the temporal waves
at the speed of light
The sea casts me up
once, twice,
two lives, 500 years apart

Is there any absolute clock
to guide me
or am I just relative to
life with too few hours

Through it all I
travel a straight path
through a round universe and
wonder when I became lost 



Beauty and its Beast

Edo van Belkom

illustrated by Lar deSouza

SHE LOOKED AT THE TICKET A LONG, LONG TIME AS tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. The numbers on it were an exact match with the numbers on the television screen.

“Tonight’s Lotto prize,” said the announcer, “is fourteen million dollars.”

Her hand began to shake with the knowledge that the tiny slip of paper between her fingers was worth so much.

Fourteen million dollars!

Oh, what she would do with that money.

She was going to spend it. Not on cars, not on a new home, and not on trips. She was going to spend it on herself.

She checked the numbers one more time to make sure they still matched, then got up off her ratty second-hand couch and went to the full-length mirror on the wall by the front door.

Yes, she was going to spend it on herself—as much as it took to rid herself of her plain, homely looks. She put a finger up against the end of her nose and imagined what it might look like if it were more slender. She pulled back the skin around her eyes to see what they might look like without the bags beneath them. She pushed her lips in a pout to make them look fuller and more alluring. She placed her hands on her hips and pictured them after the fat had been sucked from her saddlebags. And then she ran her hands up over her body, cupped her modest breasts in her hands and gave them a lift and push to make them appear to be a couple of cup-sizes bigger.

And then she smiled.

She’d been plain Jane Smithson all her life, joked about by women and passed over by men simply because of her absolutely ordinary looks.

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No more, she thought, clenching the ticket in her hand.

She'd always had the desire to change the way she looked, and now she had the means.

She would do it all.

Her smiled widened, broke into laughter, and fresh tears began streaming down her cheeks.

"I DID THE BEST I COULD, MS. SMITHSON...under the circumstances," stated Doctor Sharp.

"And what circumstances might that be?" asked Ms. Janel Smithson. She'd added the 'J' to her name when all the zeros went into her bank account. The extra letter, and the money, had given her a measure of self-confidence, something she needed to take on this so-called cosmetic surgeon who'd once promised her the world, but had yet to deliver a time zone. "As much money as you asked for up front and in cash? Access to the best facilities in the country? A team of private nurses?"

"That's not what I meant."

"No? Then what exactly did you mean?"

In the months since her lottery win, Janel had poured over dozens of fashion magazines—even a few men's magazines—looking for perfect body parts. Cheekbones from an article in *Vogue*, eyebrows from an ad in *Mademoiselle*, a nose from the cover of *Harper's*, breasts from the center pages of *Playboy*. No detail was too small to be overlooked—this was her body, after all—and she spent countless hours creating a collection of perfect parts that would become the guides and tem-

plates for her doctors. She'd have her body sculpted into a thing of beauty, a reward to herself for all the years she'd spent being utterly average.

The search for a surgeon had also taken months. Each time she produced her portfolio and explained just what she wanted, the doctor either refused to perform any surgery or would not guarantee that the procedures would bring about the desired results. She'd thanked countless surgeons for their time, then methodically moved onto the next on her list until she eventually crossed paths with Doctor Sharp. Young and handsome with a newly-created practice in the fashion district, he promised he could not only duplicate what she saw in the portfolio, but do even better.

She'd been skeptical at first, but he charged so much more than the others, she truly believed he could do what he said. She agreed to a six-month schedule of operations that would dramatically improve her looks and turn her into a beauty that was revered by all. He'd done an adequate job for the most part, but now that he was done, there was a pronounced scar under her chin. Of course it could be hidden with make-up, but it shouldn't have been there in the first place.

"You wanted so many operations performed in such a short period of time, Ms. Smithson," the doctor said unapologetically. "You were barely healed from one operation before you were moving on to the next. There were a lot of things I had to guess at, and judging by what I see, I guessed right more

often than not." He smiled and gave her a wink.

A wave of cold anger washed over her body, and she could feel the scar under her chin begin to throb. Of course, she looked better than she once had—men whistled at her as she walked by, women whispered to each other behind her back, and she was now dating a banker—but she wasn't perfect.

There was the scar...

And there was still plenty of room for improvement.

Whenever she looked in the mirror or walked past a picture window, she could still see the old Jane haunting her from just below the skin. She'd covered up all her imperfections, but none of them had been removed. They were all there just under the surface, waiting to rear their ugliness.

"You left me scarred," she said through clenched teeth.

"That! You'd be worse off falling off a bike." The doctor shook his head. "In a few months that will look like a scratch."

Janel was silent, trying to control her anger. "I could sue you for malpractice."

"You could *try*," said the doctor calmly. "But you signed enough waivers to keep a team of lawyers busy for years. I don't think you want that. You're a gorgeous woman, go out and enjoy it! Buy some sexy clothes and drive some man wild!"

Janel didn't want to smile at that, but she couldn't help it. Although she despised the doctor for not giving her everything she wanted, he was right. Despite the scar, she was

pretty now, some might even say beautiful. It was what she'd wanted all along, and now that she had it, she might as well make the most of it.

"You'll be hearing from me," she said, not wanting to let the doctor think she was satisfied with his work.

"A check-up in three months would be wise," he said.

She got up without a word and left the doctor's office without making an appointment.

JANEL CHARGED THROUGH THE revolving door of the office building and onto the square in front of it. The pedestrian traffic was busy for a midweek afternoon, and streams of anonymous people flowed past her like lemmings toward a cliff.

She glanced around for a cab and at that moment caught a glimpse of herself in the large windowpanes that sided the ground floor of the building she'd just come out of.

What little self-confidence she'd had in the doctor's office suddenly drained from her body and she was consumed by all of her old fears.

In the glass staring back at her was dumpy-looking Jane Smithson, whose nose was too big, whose breasts were too small, whose ankles were too thick, whose hair was too thin...

She turned to get away, but there was the image again in the glass windows of the building in front of her. Jane Smithson, a homely three or four, walking around dressed to the nines.

Who was she trying to fool?

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She walked over to the fountain in the center of the square and sat down on a section of stone slab lining the water's edge. She glanced at the water for a second—plain Jane was there too—then looked away and began to cry.

"I can give you what you want," said a voice.

Janel sniffed, looked up. "What?"

"I said, I can give you what you want."

Janel turned to her right and saw an old woman sitting next to her. More than just old, she was decrepit and dirty, most likely homeless and afflicted with any number of diseases. Janel hadn't noticed her sitting there a moment ago, but then she didn't notice a lot of people. "I haven't got any change," she said.

"I don't want anything from you," said the hag, a slight smile revealing a mouth that was empty save for three dirty teeth. "I want to give *you* something."

Janel looked at the two-wheeled cart at the hag's side that was brimming with junk and decided there was nothing this woman had that she might want. But then she looked at her face again and saw something different, a warm sort of smile and features that might have been pretty at one time in her life. She sighed and shook her head. "No thanks, I don't want—"

"I can give you the beauty you seek," said the hag, her bony hand arcing out over the surface of the water.

Janel followed the movement of her hand and was stunned to see herself reflected in the surface of the water. But this time it wasn't Jane

looking back at her, it was Janel. Beautiful, beautiful Janel.

Janel was speechless. Her heart began to race.

"I can do better than the doctors. Give you as much beauty as you need," she said, smiling. "*More* beauty than you could ever want."

As the initial shock of the hag's words faded, Janel let out a nervous laugh. What on earth could this woman know about beauty? she thought. Nothing, she decided. Nothing at all. "Thanks for the offer, I'll keep it in mind." Janel started to get up, but the hag's arm shot out and a surprisingly strong hand grabbed hold of her arm, keeping her seated.

"Here," said the hag, thrusting a piece of paper into Janel's hand. "So you'll know how to find me when you're ready."

Janel took the paper and the hag slowly released her arm. "*More* beauty than you could ever want."

"Right," muttered Janel under her breath, rising to her feet. She wanted to toss the paper into the fountain, but the old woman would see her throw it away and make a scene. She opened up her purse and slipped the paper inside.

"When you're ready."

Janel walked away from the hag...her heart still racing, but her head held high.

MONTHS PASSED.

Scars healed.

And Janel's banker boyfriend left her for someone else.

Maybe it was just as well. He told her many times how good she looked, how happy he was to be

with her, but she'd never believed him. She knew he was just saying those things to make her feel good. Lying to her just to get her into his bed. In the end he stopped telling her how pretty she was. Obviously, he just couldn't maintain the lie.

Someone had told her that he'd started dating some overweight sow from the bank who laughed at all his stupid jokes. Good, Janel thought, just what he deserves!

She'd made another visit to Dr. Sharp, wondering if he might redo her lips with collagen to make them full again, but he said it was still too soon. She visited several other doctors, but they didn't want anything to do with another doctor's patient.

None of them seemed to care...

She was lonely.

She was ugly.

And she needed help.

She fished inside her purse for the slip of paper she'd been handed so many months ago. It was there, a little worn and dog-eared, but still carrying its message—

*The Hag
Queen Street Bridge
below*

The faint hope that had buoyed Janel suddenly faded. The hag lived *under a bridge!* How could she help make her more beautiful? If she'd known anything at all about beauty, she would have worked her magic on herself.

But she recalled the moment when she'd been by the hag's side, looking into the water of the fountain and seeing a true beauty staring back at her. Such an exquisitely wonderful feeling, one she hadn't

had since then, and one she'd very much like to experience again.

So the hag lived under a bridge, so what. That meant that she was near a river. Perhaps, at the very least, Janel would be able to see her beautiful reflection staring back at her once more. That alone, she decided, would make the trip worthwhile.

She gazed at the mirror in the hallway of her apartment and saw Jane looking back at her, laughing and mocking her attempts to get rid of her old self.

She would go to the Queen Street Bridge in search of the hag.

After all, she had nothing to lose but Jane.

"OVER HERE!"

Janel crouched down so she could see what was under the moldy concrete at the side of the bridge. She put a hand up to steady herself, then pulled it away the moment she touched a patch of wet and rusty metal.

"Over here!" repeated the voice.

Janel stared into the shadows under the bridge and saw movement in a pile of garbage. The longer she stared, the more obvious it was that there was someone buried beneath it all.

"Is that you...?"

"I knew you'd come," said the hag, poking her head out from the pile of trash. "They always do. Can't resist. Always want more."

It was a mistake to come here, thought Janel. I must be out of my mind... No, this old goat is the one who's crazy, thinking she can teach me something about beauty.

"Come here," said the hag, moving to a spot near the river. "So we can talk."

Despite her misgivings, Janel felt drawn to the hag. Like an old and worn sweater, there was something comforting about her presence. Janel stepped awkwardly down the river bank, careful not to slip in her heels, and took a seat next to the hag.

"You've been going about it the wrong way," she said, once Janel was seated as comfortably as she was ever going to get.

"What?"

"Doctors can't give you beauty. No one can *give* you true beauty 'cept for the man upstairs."

Janel laughed, feeling foolish about being there. "If no one can give me beauty, what can you do for me?"

The hag turned to look at her, and her off-color eyes—one green, one blue—seemed to stare right through her. "I can teach you how to take beauty. Steal it from someone else and make it your own."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Beauty is a sort of energy that a person radiates. It's most noticeable in young brides on the their wedding day, or in expectant mothers, but others can have it as well. Best of all, beauty is something that can be transferred and transformed, same way the energy contained in a piece of wood is transformed into heat and light energy when it's burned."

Janel nodded, understanding.

The hag kept talking.

And Janel kept listening.

IT HAD BEEN SEVERAL WEEKS SINCE the last one and Janel was beginning to feel unattractive again. She needed some beauty, and she needed it badly.

She headed downtown and strolled along the sidewalk checking out the secretaries as they sunned themselves during their morning break. Most of them were quite homely. Ugly in fact. Look at that one there, fat as a pig and proud of it. And the one on the corner, who is she trying to fool with all that make-up? Paint like that has to be applied with a knife. And this one here, how can she go out in public with a nose like that?

They all reminded her of Jane.

Stupid, ugly, plain old Jane.

Pathetic.

And then Janel saw a woman more beautiful than herself. A young blond-haired girl catching a few rays before heading back to the office. She was sitting at a picnic table outside a cafe. Her long, slim legs were crossed, her ankles turned just so by her black heels, and just the right amount of shapely thigh revealed by the rising hem of her skirt. She had on a pale green top that tightly hugged her generous breasts and left the unblemished skin on her arms and neck bare. Her face was perfect with a delicately shaped chin that gave way to high cheekbones, smooth fair skin, a small and sculpted nose, bright blue eyes, sensuously curved eyebrows and a high unwrinkled forehead. Her hair was a bright yellow, hanging down to her shoulders in bouncy curls and waving behind her each time the wind picked up.

This was beauty, as natural and clean as spring water, as intoxicating as ambrosia.

Janel had to have it for herself.

Her hand slipped into her bag and felt the scalpel hidden within. Fingers curled around the handle, clenching it tightly for the moment when she would steal the young woman's beauty from her.

She'd done it before, plenty of times. The last one was a raven-haired teenager she'd found in the park past midnight. She'd slashed at her face, taking her beauty like money from her wallet. Before that there'd been a young redhead in an office building elevator. She'd been heading for the basement for supplies. She went down a beauty and came back up a mess. The others were all the same, stunning women who had their beauty stolen away with a few quick jabs of the knife.

Making them all ugly.

Making Janel more beautiful.

Janel lingered on the sidewalk until the young woman got up from the picnic table. God, she was tall, too! Janel clenched the knife more tightly and followed her for more than a block, waiting for her chance.

And finally it came.

The young woman turned right into an narrow alley that led to the back door of an office building on an adjoining street. Despite it being the middle of the day, the alley was empty and cloaked in shadows.

Janel pulled the knife from her bag and adjusted her grip so she could easily slash at the woman's face.

She closed in on her and was

only a few feet away...

When she felt two pairs of strong hands grab her arms and lift her from the ground. She glanced left and right and saw a pair of large men dressed in black carrying her out of the alley.

In the distance, the young woman was entering the office building, oblivious to what was going on at the other end of the alley.

The knife was pulled from Janel's hand. She floated across the sidewalk toward a long, black car...a limousine waiting at the curb, its long rear door open and waiting.

She was carried into the car. The door behind her slammed shut and for a moment there was only silence.

"Beautiful," said a voice nearby.

Janel's eyes took a few moments to adjust to the darkness inside the car. As things became clearer, she noticed a homely looking woman sitting across from her between the two men in black.

"Yes, she'll do nicely."

"What are you talking about?" said Janel. "What do you want from me?"

Silence for a moment, then, "Beauty," said the woman. "I want your beauty."

Janel felt her mouth go dry and her heart begin to race. Her eyes were fully adjusted now and she recognized the woman sitting before her. Her name was Edith Blaine, heiress to the Blaineway Retail chain. Her father had died the week before and she was preparing to take over the company in the new year. When she'd seen a picture of the woman in the news-

paper, Janel remembered feeling sorry about how awful the photo made her look. But now she realized that the photo had been touched up. Someone on the photo desk had been doing her a favor.

This woman was ugly.

"I want your beauty," she repeated.

"You can't have it," said Janel. "I won't let you."

"As if your opinion matters," she laughed. "Do you think you're the only one who knows about the hag under the bridge?"

Janel was speechless. And as she sat there in silence, the words of the hag that had once been so strange to her now made utterly perfect sense.

More beauty than anyone could ever want.

Janel had thought it ridiculous at the time. She would never be more beautiful than she wanted to be.


Never. But now...now all she wanted was to be plain Jane Smithson once more. Absolutely average in every way. Invisible in a crowd.

And at the moment, she realized, she was far more beautiful than she wanted to be.

"No, please," she cried as the two men across from her grabbed her roughly by her arms and a knife glinted in the shadows inside the car.

She fought against the two men, but they forced her back into her seat, holding her there. Immobile.

She tried to cry out again, but the knife cut her lips and sliced open her cheeks before she had the chance to scream.

OUT ON THE SIDEWALK NEXT TO the limousine, the hag sat on a bench, feeding the pigeons and watching all the beautiful people pass her by. 

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There Ain't No Strings on Me

by A. M. De Giorgio

OUT HERE IN HILL COUNTRY, WE CELEBRATE autumn with a bright festival that, for a few days near the end of September, gets all the folks from the surrounding farms into town. During this crazy time, it's inevitable to find a few odd strangers stroll into the town square and set themselves up alongside the regulars. But unlike the old-timers who complain about every deviation in color and smell from the year before, we don't take much notice of strangers unless they have something to offer that might topple the giant pumpkin record that's been solidly long-standing for the past four years.

Tonight, I decided that the nicely-dressed fellow setting up his booth across from the roasting chickens rack looked like a promising sort. A handful of folks had already gathered themselves around in a half-circle, including Fitch and his daughter. When I finally caught a glimpse of that dog sitting there on the box, I knew we were in for something interesting.

The young stranger at the booth went by the name of Stableford. He didn't waste much time getting to the point, which by the way was that his dog could speak English. Now, I don't know what folks are used to in the big cities down south, but in hill country, a talking dog raises a few eyebrows. Stableford waited a spell until all the jeering and smart-mouth remarks had settled down—I'm guessing he did that for dramatic effect—and

then before anyone had a chance to leave, he announced that an immediate demonstration was in order.

"So, Pinocchio," he said conversationally, informing us out the corner of his mouth that the critter went by that name, "tell me, what do you think of the hospitality up here in Role's Creek?"

"I don't know, Stableford," Pinocchio mused in a nasal voice that reminded me of the midget who runs the glass shop not too far from here. "None of 'em ever bothered to say 'ello to me."

We shook our heads in wonderment, clapped approvingly.

"Why you think that is?" Pinocchio added, sending a roar of laughter through the crowd.

What really impressed me was how that gaping mouth flapped along with the words, nothing like those parrots that spew out nonsense phrases through a lazy beak. Pinocchio did things more like us folks.

"Where'd you find that animal?" I shouted from the back, convinced that the critter must be some freak of nature.

"Doesn't really matter," Stableford said. "I taught Pinocchio to speak."

Nobody argued with Stableford, but they were biting at the bit to ask Pinocchio some questions. Pinocchio, greedy as any dog, agreed to oblige them for five dollars apiece. The steep price kept the dog busy for only about half an hour. And then he got cranky and jumped off the box to go lie on the step below the door of Stableford's trailer out behind the booth. I could under-

stand Pinocchio's attitude, seeing that questions about the best time to harvest turnips, or what to do about the recent explosion in grasshoppers isn't a topic dear to a dog's heart. So Stableford collected his earnings into a tidy packet, and cordially thanked us all for attending the show before he quietly set about dismantling his booth.

The crowd dispersed, most of them satisfied that the giant pumpkin's reign had indeed been surpassed. I went over to Finch, curious about his angle on the whole thing.

"Damned if I know how you teach a dog to talk," Finch admitted.

His daughter Josephine was loitering around Stableford's trailer, craning her neck up to the windows to catch a glimpse inside the trailer. She didn't seem all that interested in Pinocchio watching her suspiciously out another smaller window near the back.

"Don't be so rude," Fitch holered. Josephine glared defiantly, then continued her snooping. Nobody expects a seventeen-year old girl to listen much to her father—certainly not when her attention's elsewhere.

"So how's Kate holding up?" I said, concerned, never one to apologize often enough for my idiot son. Then again, seeing that we're neighbors and all, nobody's more sympathetic to my Eliot's problem than good old Fitch and his family.

"It's not the boy's fault, Bud," Fitch reassured me. Eliot had sneaked up on Fitch's wife while she was milking the cow. Rightfully

so, Kate yelped in fright, and this spooked the cow enough that it stamped its hind hoof right onto her leg, bruising it pretty badly. "Not like Eliot can help being quiet and sneaking up on folks."

I nodded, patted Fitch on the shoulder in appreciation.

"Say," he said. "You think that Stableford fellow can help?"

"The thought did cross my mind some," I said. If Stableford could teach a dog to master speech, then surely a mute boy couldn't be that difficult.

We came closer to the trailer, hesitated in front of Pinocchio. I asked him politely if he could call his master to the door. The dog obliged us by barking loudly, for some reason opting for the crudest form of communication at his disposal. I reckon if a dog doesn't keep to his roots every so often, he'll lose his identity.

Stableford burst out the front door, almost in a panic.

"What are you doing—get away from my—"

"Sorry to intrude, Stableford sir," I jabbered nervously, "but I'm wondering if I can have a word with you?"

"What about?" he said, frowning. But his face softened in an instant. Josephine had rejoined her father, and she seemed to be quite an eye-ful for Stableford.

Stepping in front of Fitch's daughter, I said my piece.

"Well, sir, I have this boy, Eliot. He's not too swift and all, never learned to talk is the problem, you see..."

"And I suppose you want me to

teach him to talk like I did with Pinocchio here," he said, grinning wide.

I smiled back respectfully. "Sure enough."

"It'll cost you a pretty penny," he informed me, suddenly seriously. "Think you can afford to pay me?"

"I don't have much money, sir. But I got plenty of prime livestock, all fattened up for the season. I'll give you anything you—"

"Got a well-behaved pot-bellied pig?"

"I'll slaughter my best hog for you."

"No, no, I want the swine alive and healthy—think you can manage that?"

I nodded. He seemed real pleased, so I took a chance and asked what he aimed to do with the pig.

"Are you aware that pigs are smarter than the average dog?"

"No surprise to me," I lied.

"I need to keep my act fresh, you understand? Innovation is the mother of...interestingness. The only thing more interesting than a talking dog is a talking pig."

Stableford leaned to one side while he spoke, struggling to get a peek at Fitch's daughter and her abundant attributes. Somewhat distracted, he instructed me to bring Eliot and the pig to the main road a little way outside town tomorrow at the crack of dawn.

BACK AT THE FARM, I FOUND ELIOT hunched over the chicken box, sprinkling a steady rain of grain. The chickens pecked aimlessly at the ground under the moonlight,

getting more dirt than grain.

"Those ain't owls we've got there," I declared, more frustrated than angry. Sometimes I can't figure what goes on inside that granite skull; his mother might have fared better in that regard had she lived beyond the boy's childbirth. She was always a bright woman, probably why she promptly departed skyward after presenting Eliot to this world.

Some doctor from town attributed Eliot's silence to a defective voice box. He felt I should teach the boy what he called sign language, even gave me a book to study. I'm not proud to admit I've been meaning to get around to that sign language thing for these last sixteen years. Remember, I do have a farm to keep.

"I've been putting off your education for too long," I said, talking to Eliot but looking solely at the chickens. "And I've nobody to blame but this dry and stubborn soil. We tend the crops in blood and sweat all ours lives, my boy, and can't afford to see beyond priorities. A good strong back plows more fields than an entire congregation, singing from morning to evening. I always had hopes of you marrying Josephine—seeing that Fitch's land borders mine—but of course never gave that much serious thought. Despite Fitch being reasonably friendly to the idea, the fact remains that you ain't much to look at and less than nothing to listen to. Josephine isn't too keen on getting herself stuck with the likes of you. Tomorrow though, things are going to change, and you'll soon be

yapping nonstop like the rest of us hill folk. No need to waste our time with them crazy hand signs. I'm sure that's a relief to you, being that you ain't ever been one to concentrate on things longer than a sneeze."

I could tell Eliot was real worried by the topic of this one-sided conversation. He prefers things stay the same from day to day, becomes somewhat agitated when his routine gets a shove.

He held out his palm to offer me some grain, searching my expression. I kindly took a pinch, chewed on it for a few minutes.

"You ain't gotten yourself too attached to my prized hog now, have you?"

WE STARTED WALKING ALONG the main road at the crack of dawn. Eliot kept his mind off Stableford by pretending to herd the pig in the right direction. Didn't matter to him that the animal followed us on its own.

"There's the critter," I said excitedly after a long time walking, and pointed to the little lump of fur just left of the trailer. "There's Pinocchio. And the tall fellow beside him is Mr. Stableford. Now be respectful of them both."

"You're late," Pinocchio complained when we reached them. "And that pig's a lot smaller than I imagined he'd—"

"Don't mind him," Stableford interrupted. "He's always cranky in the morning."

He regarded the pig I had brought him with an approving nod, inspecting it from all angles—

a real shame he wasn't fixing to eat the animal. The old pickup that normally hitched to the trailer had some straw laid out in the back. A wooden ramp led up to the make-shift pen. We had a little trouble convincing the pig that it belonged up there, but Pinocchio helped some by nipping from the rear.

"So let's get started, shall we?" he said, wiping the sweat from his forehead—seems it's true that city folks tire easily. "Come along boy, into my trailer."

Eliot stepped away mistrustfully, eyes glued to the dog. I grabbed my son by the arm and shoved him towards Stableford, but he kept staring at the dog.

"What're you looking at?" Pinocchio threatened. Though small of frame, the tone of his voice carried its own weight.

"Um, how many of these here lessons is my boy gonna need?"

"About one forty-five minute session should do the trick."

"Forty-five minutes?" I repeated skeptically.

"Sure," he returned. "I can tell you've got a bright lad here, one of those...brooding closet geniuses."

I shrugged, not sure if Stableford was being sincere or just polite. Made no difference to me either way, so long as he could match words and wits with Pinocchio.

He dragged my boy into the trailer and shut the door, leaving me alone with Pinocchio. Great opportunity, I realized, to get a dog's perspective on life. I knelt down to the dog's level in a gesture of friendliness and respect.

"You know," I said, "I've always

wondered why dogs go around in circles before settling down for a snooze? And why do only you males lift up your hind leg when peeing? And what about those bones you bury..."

He just watched me, tongue hanging out of that gaping mouth.

"Now, I'm not trying to be nosy or anything like that," I assured him, even though I was. "Whatever you tell just might help me understand the disposition of my own animals. Heck, if I had my way, I'd ask Stableford to teach em all to talk! Nothing's better for a farm than content livestock—so what do you say?"

Pinocchio yawned wide, stretched himself out on the ground, clearly not inclined to divulge his secrets to the likes of me. At least not for free. I patted my pockets for some loose change. As usual, they were empty.

"You're a sly one," I sighed, "let me tell you."

So I sat silently in the dirt beside Pinocchio and waited for Eliot, and before I knew it, the sun had climbed over the hills. The shadows were long, dragging clean across the road and into the ditch on the other side. Rusted leaves twirled and settled whenever the wind came along to idly pluck at the branches. I held back the sudden urge to remark how pretty the colors were around this time of year, remembering that dogs can't see most colors the way they're meant to be seen, and the comment might possibly insult Pinocchio.

Then I heard my boy's voice for the first time.

"Peter piper picked a pack of pickled peppers, pa," he said.

I shot to my feet and nearly fell over. "Sweet miracles from heaven!" I declared.

"He was a quick study," Stableford said.

"Say something boy, talk to me in your own voice," I said, grinning like a bobcat.

"I want to thank Mr. Stableford for all he's done," Eliot said in a strained voiced. He started furiously scratching at his cheeks.

Now that I was close enough, I noticed that his mouth yapped as if he didn't know what his lips were for yet. His words sounded clear enough, but the harshness of his voice rattled my ears a bit. Still, you can't get to running till you've got walking down perfect. This sure wasn't the time to nit-pick about minor details.

My boy was talking!

"Oh yes," I said, grabbing Stableford's hand, almost shaking his arm clean out of its socket. "Thank you, Mr. Stableford."

"Glad I could help," he said, smiling widely.

"Say, Mr. Stableford" Eliot said. He seemed suddenly preoccupied with his mouth, kept jutting and twisting his jaw, even as he struggled to talk. "Is it all right to jump into this talking business after all these years of keeping quiet?"

"Don't fiddle with your face like that," I whispered.

"That reminds me," Stableford said. "Don't engage your son in conversation for the next few hours or you're likely to fatigue his throat, and then he'll be back where he

started."

"We wouldn't want that," Eliot said gravely.

"You heard the man," I said sternly, "now hush."

"Now, I've got to be going," Stableford said.

"Good luck with teaching the pig," I said in parting. "We'd love to see him at next year's festival."

I WAS HUMMING SOME LIVELY square-dancing tune to keep myself from engaging Eliot in a little travel banter. By the time we crossed onto our land, I had been over the same tune at least a dozen times. Plenty of time for my boy to have rested up his voice. I was burning to get the inside scoop on Stableford's teaching secrets, hoping I could educate my own animals the same way. But before I could say a word, Fitch came sprinting down the road trailing more dust than an entire stampede of buffalo.

"Bud!" he shouted. "Bud. I've got some news for you!"

"What's got you all buzzed up?" I said.

"That Stableford fellow, that's who—scoundrel, fraud! Come on, we best get moving before he gets away."

"Now hold on there, Fitch."

"You've been swindled, Bud, just ask my daughter."

"What's Josephine got to do with anything?"

"I'm ashamed to admit it, but she was real friendly with that stranger last night, if you catch my meaning..."

He trailed off, distracted and incensed by my smirk. Josephine was

real friendly with lots of folks. You'd think that might temper Fitch's reaction by now.

"Seems the stranger went and blabbed everything to her as if he meant to impress her by how clever he was, and well, it's about your boy. He can't talk, not really. Josephine said that he's got these miniature dee-vices stitched up inside his mouth, some fancy things called electro-muscular stim-eelators."

"Now that's the silliest thing I ever heard since dogs started talking about harvesting turnips."

Still, I gestured Eliot to open his mouth so I could take a look.

"It's true," he continued, while I probed. "He controls how and when the muscles contract by some other dee-vice hidden in his hand. And the voice, well that's some clever ventriloquist parlor trick. No such thing as a talking dog, Bud, and I sure can't say I'm not relieved. So, um, you see anything in there?"

Sure enough, I saw some gizmos stuck on the inside of each cheek. Real small, wiry things painted rose to match the skin. I took out my pocketknife and gently pried at one of the wires. Eliot bolted away in pain, so I didn't try that again.

"Get your shotgun, Fitch, we've got ourselves a scoundrel to snare."

DRIVING THE WAGON ALL OUT, WE caught Stableford's trailer a few miles east of Role's Creek. He pulled over without a fuss, looking nervously down the barrel of Fitch's 12-gauge cannon.

"Around here, we don't skip out

on a deal," I informed him in a friendly manner. "You understand?"

He nodded birdlike, quick and frantic. Sure he understood, bright city fellow that he was.

I borrowed the shotgun and got into the passenger's seat of the pickup next to Stableford. We followed Fitch's wagon back to the farm, the entire ride my having to endure Stableford's apologizing for everything, until he started apologizing for not apologizing enough. He turned into some sort of blubbery idiot right before my eyes.

"Pull yourself together," I finally shouted when I couldn't stand it anymore. It's not like I'm some trigger-happy hothead looking to shoot folks for no reason at all.

"Listen to me, Bud—can I call you Bud?" he squeaked, keeping his eyes glued on Fitch's wagon up front.

"That's my name so what else you gonna call me?"

If he meant to laugh at that, it came across sounding more like a bad case of the hiccups.

"That's a good one," he said. "Bud it is then—please try to understand my side, Bud—I helped your Eliot the only way I could!"

"Maybe we misunderstood each other when I asked you to teach my boy to talk—what you did sure ain't what I had in mind." I couldn't help leaning in closer to stress my point, the gun barrel nudging gently against his ribs. "Folks around here don't take too kindly to being swindled."

"Is that what you think? That I'm in the snake-oil business? You're

mistaken Bud-Pinocchio himself can tell you how very mistaken you are—stop the truck and ask him.”

“Your dog didn’t seem too talkative this morning—at least not without your help.”

“That’s easily explained, Bud. Pinocchio’s afraid the wrong people might hear him, and then he’d find himself in some oversized birdcage, prodded and pondered over for the rest of his days. He’s not only smart, he also has a lot of sense, knows that outside of show-time it’s unsafe to be anything but a common dog. It’s hard to believe, Bud, but scientific curiosity prevents some people from simply appreciating a natural oddity for its own sake.”

“To be real honest, Stableford, sir, I think *you’re* the oddest thing anyone’s ever likely to come across.”

FOR A LONG TIME, ME AND Pinocchio did nothing but stare at each other, neither of us knowing what the other had in mind. Clearly, the dog knew something was up, that Stableford had gotten himself into another unholy mess. Why else would I be here in his trailer, kneeling down on all fours, feeling more than a little foolish?

“I know we’ve been through this before,” I said, “but this time’s a little different. I’m in a bit of a bind on how to best deal with Stableford.”

Pinocchio’s head tilted to one side, a sure sign he at least was listening.

“Science don’t impress me much,” I added, figuring he needed to hear that first and foremost. “So

don’t be afraid that way.”

Whatever he thought, he still wasn’t talking—not unless you consider growling and huffing as talking. I had the idea to have a look in his mouth and be done with it, but when my fingers got too close, he snapped his jaws threateningly at the air, making it clear he’d have none of that.

“I think I’ll make myself more comfortable,” I said, grabbing a chair. Patience is bred into us hill folks even before we’re old enough to lift the plow. I think it comes from the sorry rate at which things grow around these parts.

Still, that’s not why I decided to wait as long as I did. The way I figured, in some strange way this was no different than waiting all those years for Eliot to talk.

Old habit, I guess.

“Things all right in there?” Fitch called from outside after a good half-hour had gone by.

“Better than they’re gonna be for Stableford,” I hollered back. Glancing at Pinocchio, I let out a deep sigh, admitted that even I knew when to call it quits.

More than a little disappointed, I got up and made for the door.

“Don’t be too hard on him,” I suddenly heard that nasally voice of his say when I reached for the knob. There was no doubt who had spoken. It was just the two of us in that trailer.

“Well ain’t you as stubborn as a mule!” I shouted.

“No need to be rude,” Pinocchio said.

“Heck, dog, I don’t mean to be,” I apologized. “I’m just a little

confused now, that's all—does this mean Stableford taught ya to talk?"

"So he claims," Pinocchio said dryly. "There was a time when I couldn't say a word without those nasty devices he developed...then one day, I didn't need his help anymore."

"Just like that?"

He twitched his body in what I assumed was a shrug—but something like that's hard to see on a dog. "Back then, Stableford had me performing so often I'd go to sleep in the middle of the act with my mouth still flapping."

"That don't sound like it'd be too good for return business," I noted.

"Not to mention my sense of dignity," Pinocchio said. "Maybe it was the sheer will to get control over what I had to say and when that finally did it."

"Sounds reasonable," I nodded.

ELIOT SITS ACROSS FROM JOSEPHINE in the kitchen, grinning awkwardly with a mouth full of mashed potatoes. Now that the two are courting, I'll have to teach the boy some manners. Josephine's a discerning girl, and it's going to take some time before the grandkids start scampering about the old house. Tied to a little three-legged stool by the sink, Stableford is doing his best to hasten that goal. I've got the gun leaning against the archway between the kitchen and living room so he can see it whenever he needs some encouragement.

Reclining lazily on the sofa, Fitch lights himself another cigar, and takes a deep puff. The air is thick with smoke in here, but I can still

smell all the food out there in the kitchen. It's a banquet really, cooked up by Fitch's wife Kate for this special first gathering between future families. It's a shame she preferred staying home, wanting no part of this occasion beyond preparing the food. I'll have to compliment her on the way she prepared the chops and glazed ham. I know what you're thinking, that it isn't fair to be eating Stableford's pig, seeing that he sort of kept up his end of the deal. But he gave us back the pig, calling it an early wedding gift. I don't know where he got the idea that this would free him up of obligation, as much as we appreciate the gesture. The only thing that'll do that is to hear Eliot yapping on his own, or better yet, to hear those wedding bells for Josephine and Eliot.

"Would you like some buttered bread, Josephine my dear?" Eliot says in a gentlemanly manner, drooling red wine all over his best shirt. There's a short delay before his own intentions catch up to the words. He eventually takes the basket and holds it out to Josephine. One day my boy's bound to get tired of someone else putting words in his mouth, and then he'll surprise us all.

Josephine nods absently, looking past her suitor to Stableford. He sneaks a wink at her, so I stretch my hand and give the shotgun a little pat to keep him in line.

Out in the back yard, I can hear Pinocchio barking and howling like his tail's on fire. I decide to stretch my legs a bit by paying him a friendly visit.

By the looks of it, a raccoon up on the roof of my old shack has gotten him all excited, and he's too busy trying to figure out how to reach the critter to be concerned

with the likes of me. So I go back inside the house.

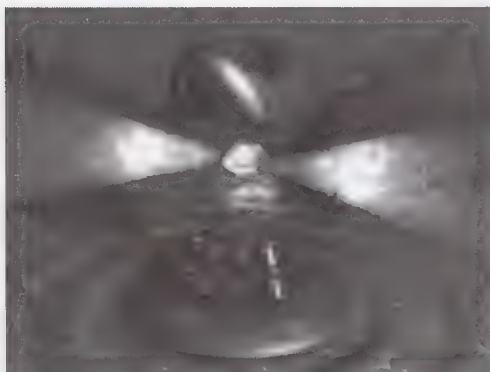
I expect Pinocchio will let me know when he's in a mood to talk. 🍁

About our cover artist:

ADRIAN KLEINBERGEN is a Canadian, a husband, an illustrator, a jeweler, and a writer. He has been a contributor to *On Spec* since its inception and hopes to continue on to wherever it might lead. Adrian's work has been featured on 3 of our previous covers: Spring 1991, Spring 1995 (Horror & Dark Fantasy theme issue), and Fall 1997. His wife, BRENNA TOBLAN, photographed the sculpture featured on this issue's cover.

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The Draft Dodger

James Keenan

SUNNY STOOD ON THE OBSERVATION DECK AND focused his visor on the sleek-furred fisher attacking a porcupine. The fisher's snout was long, thin, and full of little razor teeth. The porcupine squatted with gray spikes ringing its body, seemingly secure. The fisher feinted, hissed, and bit the porcupine in the face. From three hundred meters away, Sunny heard the squeal and saw the terror quake in the porcupine's shoulders.

The house phone patched to his visor and he stared at the incoming priority in disbelief: Security Central. His brother Saul never called from work, couldn't call. Sunny answered.

Saul's square face held no smile. "They've drafted the latest Rolvost subjects; the female is from Albuquerque. You are the male. The Press and the Press Gang are on their way."

He knew that it was ridiculous but Sunny had to ask, "Are you sure?"

"Of course. What are you going to do?"

Sunny's mind was mud. "Dodge it," he answered, surprising himself with his firmness.

The wrinkles around Saul's eyes deepened. He rang off.

Sunny tended the southeast corner of Algonquin Park in the transition zone where deciduous forest turned coniferous. He should leave immediately, snatch a few provisions and hike to the headwaters. Maybe find a cave to winter in before they started searching for him with SatCams. Except that Saul would be the obvious source of the tip. Sunny had to leave the authorities something to convince them that he had discovered the Press Gang on

his own.

The visor switched back to the forest floor. The fisher had flipped the porcupine and was devouring its underbelly. The porcupine's lungs continued to pump.

Sunny switched the visor to far-see, edited out the atmosphere, and stared up at the Swan Nebula, its bright stars on the verge of self-destruction. He linked the visor to his house system and switched to the Astronomy Library. It was a million to one that he had been star gazing in the daytime, spotted the Press Gang shuttle, figured that he was the target, and fled. Of course, the odds against his being drafted were longer than that.

He shouldered an emergency pack, left the house open and active, and sprinted to wetland. Branches tugged at him as he slipped into a pungent spruce bog. He hopped from rock to stump where he could to avoid making footprints.

A faint whine of jets settling to ground reached his ears. The Press always entered first to capture the draftee's emotions. When they found him gone, would the Press Gang pursue immediately or assume that he was just out strolling and wait a few minutes?

Sunny set his jacket to chameleon, adjusted it, and became green on brown. He pulled a bow from his pack as he climbed a steep hill and poked his head above the crown. His nose was even with a growth of bracket fungi that shingled out of the damp side of an old maple. He stroked one; it was tough and rubbery. Something

hummed. He turned, and directly behind him hovered a flying snout.

The snout's plastic proboscis pointed at him and he had no doubt that it was signaling the Press Gang right now.

Without thinking, Sunny pressed a stud on his bow. It strung itself and an arrow indexed from the cartridge and notched. He raised the bow, used his back muscles to draw it back full, and let the string slip from his fingers. The arrow struck the snout in its port jet with a clang. The little device wobbled and retreated.

Sunny ran. A root tripped him and he cracked his elbow on a boulder. He scrambled to his feet as something big and gray dropped from the sky to alight a few hundred meters in front of him. It was up again in a flash and he could see the medicine snake Press Gang symbol on its fuselage. It descended to his left, jumped back up over him, the jetwash fluttering the leaves, descended to his right, and alighted a final time behind him.

He was surrounded: four Press Gangsters in diamond formation with him in the center.

Admonishments filled his mind. Duty demanded that he respect the draft; he was breaking the law. He could not raise arms against the Press Gang. Common sense told him that he had no chance of escape. Sunny thought like an animal, went low, and notched another arrow.

On his hands and knees, Sunny crawled down a gully and water seeped under his jacket to chill his wrists. He came to a clearing, rose,

and sprinted. A scrape sounded to his left from above.

A Press Gangster had secured himself halfway up a maple to scan with a search visor. He pointed a cramp rifle at Sunny. Sunny raised his bow. The Gangster fired and a bluish bolt smashed Sunny in the torso and continued through his body to crackle and dissipate on the soil.

Sunny collapsed in agony. His muscles contracted, squeezing him into a tight fetal ball, the pressure so intense that he thought he'd snap his own bones. He screamed. They said that it was impossible to move after absorbing a cramp shot — you couldn't stretch out. He remembered the draft and shoved his right leg straight. Sweat broke out on his forehead.

"Please," the Press Gangster yelled, "don't resist, you'll injure yourself."

Sunny screamed again and fought to keep his leg straight. He shook all over. He rolled onto his stomach and tried to stand. The pain won. With a final groan, he passed out.

THE SEDATIVE RELEASED HIM IN stages. He became aware of a firm mattress and the smell of himself, disinfected but not bathed. His eyes were still blank when his hearing opened and a soft, male voice registered.

"I'm perplexed that they'd allow anyone, even a forest tender, a bow and arrow. I'll raise that at the hearing—too much leeway was given."

Sunny opened his eyes. His visitor continued.

"I told that fine doctor that you'd come around early! I can judge a person, you know."

Sunny ran his tongue inside his mouth and didn't like what he tasted. He turned his head and gobbled on the pillow. "Who are you?"

His visitor had averted his eyes. "I'm your mediator. I trust you're feeling better?"

"Why does it matter? I'll be dead in a few days. Rolvast cures jack all."

"That's no way to talk." The mediator's gray suit blended into the walls to create the illusion that his round face floated unsupported. "I also represent the female inductee, Navdeed. She's superb. She greeted the Press with a hug and made an impromptu speech about the importance of the draft and leaving a legacy for her family. Had us all in tears I'll tell you, including her Press Gang, which of course she didn't make chase her."

"Sorry to be a bother."

"Listen, you have a second chance to embrace the draft properly. This isn't common knowledge, but not all inductees react with nobility. Some initially resist, like you, although rarely as forcibly. If you repent, the Press Gang won't tell; there'll be no public humiliation."

"No." A discreet red light blinked beneath the room's single window. Sunny figured that Central had alarmed the room. If he slipped out, they'd know.

The mediator's warm eyes frosted over. "You are aware that they'll restrain you and treat you by force if they have to? Most unpleas-

ant, but we will not permit the seven thousand VR6 victims that are confirmed annually to simply perish."

"I won't volunteer."

"Please be silent. I know what you need. I'll arrange for the hospital staff to take special care of you, the deluxe treatment, and then you will spend time with Navdeed. She's a good influence."

The mediator left and the guard in the hall addressed Saul by rank. "You can go in now, sir," she said.

Saul's Central uniform shone like steel. He shut the door in her face and checked the room with a bug searcher. "How are the cramps?"

"My muscles are loaded with lactic acid," Sunny said. "Did they trace your call? Do they suspect you?"

"No, and maybe. Everyone at Central treats me the same, exactly the same, despite the fact that my brother is, uh—"

"A criminal?"

"You know better. Will you make peace with them?"

"It'll take a full Press Gang to dose me."

"I figured. Don't hurl yourself out of any windows; I'm working on a way to free you. Are you prepared to spend the rest of your days wearing another face and shucking oysters in the tropics?"

"Yes. I'll send you a postcard."

"I'm also preparing an identity and escape plan for myself. We'll likely never see each other again."

"You can't throw away your career."

Saul shrugged. "I've no choice.

It's dodgy that I'll be able to beat Security even with my clearances, and no way can I do it without leaving a trail."

"I'll escape on my own."

"Impossible. Either surrender or we'll both have to run."

"Saul, I cannot volunteer but I can't let you—"

"It's settled then. Get your strength back."

NAVDEED SAT PALMS UP, SPINE straight as a building, as the mediator displayed life-size holographs of VR6 victims. The disease attacked their facial muscles and left their faces droopy bags of skin covered in sores.

The mediator read from a research paper, "Eighty-four percent success in vitro with tracer quantities, coupled with positive A.I. simulation, support the conclusion that Rolvast Revision Seven war-rants further testing, in vivo. What do you think, Navdeed?"

"It is an honor to help defeat this disease."

"And your thoughts, Sunny?"

Sunny was thinking that one of the room light supports was a bent metal tube that would fit over his knuckles nice and snug, and if he could rip it from the wall and lure the hall guard inside...

"Sunny?"

"I dunno." Through the window, he noticed a shuttle descend to a port not more than a thousand meters away. It was a long distance shuttle, it could take him anywhere.

"If you refuse to participate I will transfer you to a detention cell. What is your opinion of the Rolvast

research?"

"If they fill our veins with VR6 they're committing murder. Rolvast is iterations away from efficacy—if at all."

"There is a risk. Should humanity cease medical research and let the infected die?"

"Test the drug another way."

"You cannot suggest that we return to the era where we experimented on the impoverished, or prisoners, or the mentally ill."

"No, the draft is fairer than attacking the weak," Sunny answered. He knew what he wanted to say next and his throat tightened. Angry with the ambiguity in his own mind, he blurted, "I say that we use animals."

Navdeed hissed. The mediator looked like he had swallowed a razor. "Sunny, please," he said.

"Animal testing served humans well for ages."

"As did slavery," said the mediator. "To inflict suffering upon other creatures—"

"Yeah, if you inject VR6 into a rat it's a bad day for that rat. But it's better than doing it to me."

"I didn't appreciate the depths of your—I hate to sound judgmental—savage belief system," said the mediator. "It's healthy to bring it into the open. You must have questioned yourself? Did you ever consider counseling?"

Sunny snarled. "I blame any bouts of self-loathing I have on my upbringing."

"If you advocate harming animals for your own selfish benefit, the revulsion you feel towards yourself is justified," the mediator said.

"We're animals, a part of this ecosystem, and using them strikes me as natural."

The mediator's round face bobbed like a balloon caught in a gust. "I shall schedule an analyst."

"If you want to help me, challenge the Animal Rights Act."

"It would only harm you further to propose such an insupportable—"

"That referendum was flawed. A minority believed that humans have no right to test animals but most people were conned into voting in favor."

"Billions duped and you alone perceive their error?" the mediator asked.

"They were told that animal testing was a crutch, that once researchers were forced to abandon it they'd find effective alternatives: lab testing, computer simulations, artificial organs. That's a myth. Our physiology is way too complex and medicine remains empirical: hack a piece out of a patient and see if they survive."

"You talk like a coward," Navdeed said.

Sunny jumped to his feet. "And you babble on about your children while you let yourself be sacrificed. What if you could avoid the draft and live to see grandchildren? Would you?"

"My principles are sacred," she said.

Sunny thought that he saw doubt in her eyes.

THE NEXT DAY, NAVDEED LEANED close enough to Sunny for him to smell baby smells on her, the powder and odors of her infant, as she

spoke. "...so inspiring how the inductee's response provided the clues needed to finally defeat AIDS."

"How many draftees died?"

She sighed. "It doesn't matter. They persevered."

Sunny glanced outside. The blinking alarm by the window was off! His heart pounded. He reached down to retighten his shoes, ready to move. A thump came from the hall.

Saul kicked open the door and entered backwards, dragging the unconscious guard. Navdeed opened her mouth to scream, and Sunny clamped his hand over her face. She bit him hard. Sunny grunted and twisted her body towards his brother. Saul stabbed a hypo in her forearm. She spasmed and sagged. Sunny laid her in his chair.

Saul shut the door and removed his backpack. "My shuttle leaves in eleven minutes. You have twenty-three." He passed Sunny a holstered cramp gun, I.D., and a jacket and trousers. "You know how to use a cell binder?"

"Yes." Sunny changed pants, snapped the holster over his hip, and slipped on the jacket. "Did you bring extra retinal masks?"

"One spare set in case the first don't hold."

"Would they fit Navdeed?"

"Why?"

"I want to give her a choice."

"Don't screw around. Miss that shuttle and Central will have you." Saul explained how to revive her, and put her under again if necessary.

"I've got to go." Saul grabbed

Sunny's shoulder and they locked eyes. It was enough. He left.

Sunny gave Navdeed a shot. He taped false prints to his fingertips. With a metal tweezer, he plucked two retinal masks from their case and screwed them into his eyes. It hurt like hell. Tearing, he grabbed the cell binder, flicked it on, and began running it over his clothes and skin.

Navdeed's eyes fluttered. "What are you doing?"

"Trapping my skin flakes and follicles. It's temporary, enough to get me out of here without leaving a DNA trail."

"They'll draft someone else."

"Navdeed, come with me. Someday you might be able to return, maybe see your grandkids."

"I can't. The shame—"

"You could help them from afar if they got in trouble."

She swallowed. "How?"

Sunny plucked up another retinal mask and stood before her chair. "Lean back, be still." He screwed one in and she gasped. "It looks like it took."

He brought the second mask close and she blinked involuntarily. He trapped her eyelid open with his thumb and concentrated.

Sunny felt her slim hand under his jacket. There was a jerk as she ripped the cramp gun from its holster. He chopped at her arm too late; the discharge caught him in the mid-section and flung him to the floor.

Rolling in pain, he heard her yank open the door and run screaming down the corridor.

THE RECLINER GRIPPED NAVDEED at her ribs and behind her head to

keep her from lolling sideways. Folds of skin hung over her eyes but she had gone blind yesterday so it was no matter.

A large metal box clamped around Sunny, leaving only his head exposed. Inside, restraints seized his limbs and he had wriggled only once before the deep probes made him stay still. Violet blotches covered his skin and his face looked like it was melting, but he was in better shape than Navdeed. She wouldn't live past tomorrow and he had days ahead of him. The Rolvost had almost saved him, throwing the disease into remission for thirty hours.

Navdeed's family trooped in, weeping, and surrounded her. A Press woman pointed her finger camera at Navdeed.

"I never had any doubt," Navdeed croaked. "Success eludes us this time, but the doctors assure me

that we're close. One more revision, two at the outside, and we'll free the world of this horrid disease."

The doctor inserted a long needle through a port in the box and drew blood from Sunny's arm. She switched on a smile and he glared at her.

The mediator appeared before them. "I asked the Press to leave you be, to avoid exploiting you," he said.

"Thanks."

"Try to be civil." The mediator nodded towards the doctor.

"Are you scheduled to autopsy me?" Sunny asked her.

"Well, yes."

"Murderer."

She stalked off.

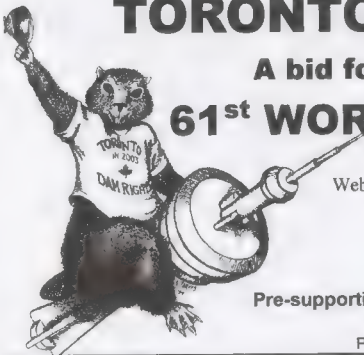
"You should apologize to her," the mediator said.

Sunny coughed but was unable to wipe the drool from his chin. "No." 🍁

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The Dream House

Melissa Hardy

illustrated by Lar deSouza

DONALD DIED IN HIS SLEEP. TIDY AND SO LIKE HIM.

Mavis awoke to find him...well, gone.

“Like that painting,” she explained to Mr. Hunter. (Mr. Hunter was the minister of Siloam United, Mavis’s church.) “I’m not sure who it’s by. Someone famous. The angel guarding the tomb...and he says to the women who’ve come to prepare Christ for burial, ‘He is not here. He is risen.’ ”

“Ah !” Mr. Hunter nodded. He knew the canvas she referred to. A copy of it hung in Knox College on the University of Toronto campus where he attended classes while at seminary. “Christ’s pierced feet dangling just above the women’s heads as if He were being sucked up to Heaven even as they spoke...” he recollected.

“Exactly!” Mavis interrupted. “Only his body was there beside me (Donald’s, that is), right where it’s always been. He would never let me sleep on the left side. That was his side. Nothing would persuade him otherwise. It was just that his body was... How can I put this, Mr. Hunter? Vacated. Like premises.”

The minister slid back into the soft, chintz-covered armchair, sipped bitter tea as he tried to gauge the widow’s grief. A small, round woman in her early fifties, neatly made up, meticulously coiffed, and packed tight into a rayon dress spangled with pink hibiscus, bought with a Florida vacation in mind, no doubt: Cypress Gardens, the Epcott Centre... Well, mourning was out of style these days, Mr. Hunter reflected, something only immigrants did: real Canadians got on with things. Besides, Mavis Cameron was not the first gaudy widow to whom he had paid his condolences. “You’re bearing up well,” he commented. “Married...what? Thirty years?”

“Thirty-two last month.”

"Very well!" the minister concluded.

"I suppose it hasn't sunk in yet," Mavis interjected. This worried her—her lack of conspicuous emotion, her failure to grieve. The truth was that Donald's passing had merely annoyed her. Then she had felt relieved. It was not as if he had ever been unkind. Just that he bored her. For years and years and years.

"After the funeral." The minister leaned forward and gave her hand a reassuring pat as he stood to leave. "That's when it will hit."

TWO DAYS AFTER DONALD'S memorial service, Mavis made an appointment with a realtor whose card a friend had given her. A very tasteful card, ladylike and understated: Jean...Something. She was a large, placid woman tidily done up in a green tartan suit and a yellow blouse with a big floppy bow. Soft, reddish hair and eyes the color of slate. She spoke with a slight, very refined British accent. "Now, Mrs. Cameron, how can I be of service?"

"I want to sell this house," the widow told her. "Buy something different. More suited to my needs."

The funny thing was: they had bought the monster house after the children had grown and moved away. Five bedrooms. Four bathrooms. A harvest room, for God's sake, whatever that was. The big sprawling house had made Donald feel safe, perched high on a sodded bluff packed tight with landfill, sandwiched between equally overblown and unwieldy houses.

"I've never liked it," she con-

fessed to Jean. "Too big. Too new. I feel at sea in it. Afloat without an anchor."

"Perhaps you'd prefer a one-story," Jean suggested. "A nice condominium in an adult community? No yard work. No maintenance..."

"No," Mavis interrupted her. She knew that she sounded brusque, even peevish, but now that bossy old Donald had left the building, wasn't it her turn? "Old is what I want," she told the realtor. "Something quaint with a garden."

"In that case..." replied Jean, smiling.

MAVIS FELL IN LOVE WITH THE house the moment she saw it. Located on a quiet back street in the section of the City known as the Old South because of its position relative to the river, it was a classic Ontario cottage, built in the 1890s of locally quarried yellow brick: a one-story bungalow covered with a steeply pitched slate roof. The walls were covered with climbing ivy and an English-style perennial garden surrounded the house on three sides. It had been an early spring and the daffodils, crocuses and tulips were nearly at an end, while the peonies were just beginning to open and the irises to unfurl. Fitted into the transom above the carved oak door was a pane of cranberry glass into which was etched the name of the house.

"'Fernleigh Cottage,'" Mavis read.

Jean retrieved the house key from the lockbox hanging on the door. "Pretty, isn't it?" She pointed to the plaque beside the door. "The

house was designated as a heritage property a dozen years ago. That has its disadvantages. You have to comply with certain regulations, check with the authorities if you want to make any structural changes. Most people don't want to bother." She unlocked the door and, stepping to one side, held it open for Mavis.

Mavis stepped through the door into a narrow hall.

Jean followed. "The living room is just in here," the realtor said, steering Mavis by her elbow into a large, high-ceilinged room painted a pale wheaten color. An oak mantelpiece flanked by bookshelves of the same rich wood took up the whole of one wall and a big bay window overlooked a side garden abloom with a tangle of pink roses.

"The house was built by a Scottish brewer by the name of Cedric Ferneyhough just before World War I for his British wife...so she wouldn't be lonely for England," Jean told her. "Unfortunately, Mrs. Ferneyhough never saw the house. She died mid-Atlantic from some fever. Let me show you the bedrooms. There are two."

"I had no idea such a cottage existed outside of England...or a fairy tale," marveled Mavis, following Jean down the hall. "Who would think of selling such a place?"

"The owner was transferred," Jean explained. "Now here is the master bedroom. At least it's the bigger of the two. You'll notice, of course, the detailed plasterwork on the ceiling...nice against that intense blue, isn't it? And the built-in shelves... Added later: 1900; 1910.

Very Arts and Crafts... Here's the bathroom. There is only the one separating the bedrooms." She opened the door to reveal a black and white tiled room with an old fashioned, claw-footed tub and a bulky pedestal sink. "Put in in the 1920s and never modernized," said the realtor. "Not new but they made things to last in those days." She led Mavis through the bathroom into the second bedroom. "The last owner called it the Ivy Room, because of the wallpaper. A perfect guest room..."

"I don't expect many visitors," Mavis cut in. "A daughter in B.C. A son in Alberta. Both have young families. I visit them. Not the other way around."

"Is that so?" Jean asked. "Well, perhaps a study then..." She opened the door to the hall and waved Mavis through. "The kitchen is at the end of the hall. Like the bathroom, it was put in in the '20s. So much storage space! And a full walk-in pantry!"

TWO WEEKS LATER, AS THE MOVERS were preparing to unload the van parked in front of Fernleigh Cottage, Mavis stood in the front hall of the as-yet empty house, gripping a brass key so hard that it cut into the soft skin of her palm. She inhaled deeply. The house smelled of lemon, dust and beeswax. Her house, that is.

She had made Jean's job very easy. She had not looked at another house after Fernleigh Cottage but made an offer on the spot. It was the house she had always wanted, after all. The house that she had dreamed

of all these years.

FOR A FEW WEEKS, MAVIS CONTINUED to attend church service at her old parish, but it was all the way across town from Fernleigh Cottage and, besides, there was a United Church not two blocks away from her new home. "It's a shame to leave dear old Siloam after so many years," she told Mr. Hunter apologetically, "but Empress United is so much more convenient."

However, she never got around to attending the nearby church, even after its minister, advised by Mr. Hunter of the new sheep in his flock, had come to call on her. It seemed like every Sunday was too fine to stay indoors and her new garden required a great deal of tending.

Over the summer, Mavis lost touch with most of her old friends. Well, that was not surprising, she reflected. Donald had been the social one. Always inviting people over so that he could show off the rotisserie on his barbecue. Most of their friends had been, in fact, his friends or neighbors or acquaintances from the church. Friendly relations borne of proximity...except now they were no longer close. Her new neighbors seemed standoffish. A little reserved, even wary. Admittedly they were, all of them, young families, having little in common with the older woman she had become.

"So, you're the new owner?" one young woman asked her. She was about the age of Mavis's daughter. Her name, she said, was Patty. "Fernleigh Cottage changes hands

so often, we don't know who's in and who's out anymore."

"Really?" said Mavis. "What happens to all the owners?"

"They die. Get transferred," Patty explained. "The bottom line is: Nobody stays for long."

"Well," Mavis smiled. "I will. I'm not going anywhere."

She wasn't either, no matter what her children wanted. Lately, they had started to make all sorts of noises. They were worried about her. Wasn't she lonely? Wouldn't she like to come out west and take care of her grandchildren for them? No, thank you. She would not. Mavis had never told anybody this, but she did not like children. She had been hard put to tolerate her own but now they were grown and that was that. I did my part, she thought. Putting on her sun hat with the lime-green gauze scarf to ward off pollen and stray bees, she took up her hedge clippers and set out to prune the rampant honeysuckle that fed on the soft yellow bricks of Fernleigh Cottage like an eager infant at the breast, sweet-smelling and full of bees.

SHE DIDN'T FIND OUT ABOUT THE apiary until midsummer. How could Jean have omitted...or forgotten that there were four fully functional beehives out back of the woodshed—a real operation? After all that talk of disclosure and agency relations—fiduciary this, fiduciary that—and the documents Mavis had agreed to sign not knowing what on earth they meant but only knowing that she had to have Fernleigh Cottage no matter what? Well, perhaps

Jean hadn't known about the apiary.... or perhaps she had preferred to forget, given that host of municipal ordinances concerning beehives within city limits. In any case, Mavis herself didn't know until the little girl showed her. Who the little girl was or why she was wearing that odd, old-fashioned dress that looked like the sort of frock sported by Hayley Mills in *Pollyanna*, Mavis couldn't say, but there the child was, standing in the hallway like she owned the place and saying to Mavis. "So you know about the beehives out back? Such sweet honey! It's a good thing you have that charming hat with the green gauze. Now all you'll need is a sturdy pair of garden gloves and you won't feel so much as a prick when they sting you." She seemed there but not quite there, Mavis observed. Visible but not...solid somehow.

"You'd better show me," Mavis advised the child warily, on her guard.

"Very well," the girl replied and, turning on her high-top booted heel in a way that suggested she had just materialized from a puff of smoke, she started down the hall, through the kitchen, out the back door and across the tumbled floor of the screened-in porch. She led Mavis through the back yard and around the wood shed. "Here they are," she said, and indeed, there they were: four beehives shaped as traditional beehives are and alive with buzzing insects. "Now you can have fresh honey," the girl explained.

"Does this explain the smell of beeswax?" Mavis asked her, suddenly suspicious.

"Absolutely," the girl replied.

"One last thing," Mavis cut in.

"What?" asked the girl.

"Who are you?" asked Mavis.

"What is your name?"

"Rosamund," replied the girl and disappeared.

Then Mavis woke up, got out of bed, walked down the hall, through the kitchen, onto the porch, down the porch steps, across the backyard, then around the garden shed, following a path that she had, for the first time, perceived to be a path. Behind the garden shed, in the sharply differentiated light of dawn where shadows spin lines around images, burred four beehives—waxen, incarnate pyramids. She could smell the sweetness smoking in them like cane fields set distantly afire.

"HOW COULD YOU HAVE PAID SO much for it?" her daughter lamented. What might have been a decent stab at an inheritance...squandered on what sounded to Angela like an antediluvian crofter's shack! "The big house had five bedrooms, four bathrooms, a harvest room, for Christ's sake..."

"Angela!" Mavis warned darkly. "The Lord's name..." Although the truth was that Mavis's religion had begun to seep from her. A slow leak. Like air from a tire. But Jesus was a genial sort, she reasoned. Water to wine. Fish to loaves. Or was it fish and loaves? She couldn't remember. In any case, He wouldn't mind being used like this. In a game between mother and daughter where the mother always wins.

50 The Dream House

"It's just that...! \$350,000! For what?"

"It's a heritage property!" Mavis defended Fernleigh Cottage.

"Two bedrooms. One bathroom, ...à la Flintstone! An antiquated kitchen, the sort of kitchen Virginia Woolf would have used, if she could have boiled an egg...! I thought you were doing that empty-nest thing..."

"No, dear," Mavis corrected her dryly. "When your father and I sold the little house on Branch Street where you and Steven grew up, and bought the big house...that's when we did the empty-nest thing. Spread out. Stretched our wings."

"Downsizing, then!" Angela countered.

"Besides," Mavis continued. "I haven't told you about the West Wing?"

"The West Wing?" Angela demanded. "What do you mean: the West Wing?"

"Just that it has one," Mavis replied. "Fernleigh Cottage, that is. A West Wing. It comes off the porch out back. Grows, really. Very... organic and quite extraordinary, really. A sort of gallery with windows just everywhere. An abandoned space, I would say. Unused. Forgotten. But so much promise, Angela! Do you know I've been thinking of taking up pottery? Or photography? Because there's one of those sinks, you see... One of those big laundry style tubs... You know the type!"

"Wait a minute!" her daughter interrupted her. "I thought it was only a small little house. What's all this about a West Wing?"

"I was just as surprised as you are," Mavis reassured her.

"Surprised?" her daughter asked. "You mean; you didn't notice it?"

"Exactly!" Mavis replied. "Until I discovered it..."

"Discovered it?" Angela repeated.

"Actually I had a dream," Mavis admitted. "But when I woke up, there it was!"

"The West Wing?" Angela was incredulous.

"Yes!" her mother assured her.

Right! thought Angela. That's it. That's the explanation: Daddy's death has unhinged her. I should have flown her out here after the funeral, but Alex had that big soccer meet and Katie was in Kiwanis... Still, Mom's only fifty-four, not old enough to be properly senile. But she's dreaming whole additions! West wings! What am I to do?

"I'm coming east," she told her mother.

"I wouldn't bother, dear," Mavis fended her off "You've got the kids and I...I've got the whole West Wing to decide what to do with! Can't it wait?"

"No, well, for a couple of months," Angela replied. "These ridiculous Kiwanis recitals. So much pressure. There's not a day goes by that Katie doesn't vomit. After that."

"Soon enough!" Mavis trilled. "Then you can visit The Artist's Studio...whatever the Art turns out to be!"

The next day Mavis went out and bought a kiln and registered for a pottery class through the PUC. She also signed up at the college for a

beginning photography course. However, she never got around to attending either of those classes because, by this time, she had discovered the money under the floorboards in the pantry.

This is how it happened: a long time ago at a church bazaar, Mavis had bought a jar of Margaret Lawton's raspberry preserves; she and Donald had finished them perhaps five years earlier. It had been something of a chore: Margaret had not used enough sugar, in Donald's estimation; they weren't very good.

One night, however, Mavis dreamed that she had awoken hungry for toast spread with raspberry jam. Up from her bed she arose and shuffled her slippered way to the kitchen, thence to the pantry in pursuit of the much-despised (and long since eaten) preserves, where, to her surprise, she tripped over a loose floorboard. Taken with curiosity (for surely there had been no floorboards loose earlier that evening), she knelt and easily rocked loose then removed altogether the twelve-inch plank of upheaved hardwood that had caught at her toe. Below it were stacked, in tightly rolled wads of thumbled bills, what looked to be thousands and thousands of dollars.

"I see you've found the money."

Mavis peered over her shoulder to see the girl in the Pollyanna frock, Rosamund, the one who had shown her where the apiary was. She was standing in the shadows, her face erased by darkness. Curiously, Mavis wasn't in the least concerned what the child was doing in the narrow hall of Fernleigh Cottage, fully

dressed in period clothing in the early hours of the morning, but that is the way dreams are.

"Yes," replied Mavis. "The floorboard was loose. I had a look. Why is it here? Whose is it?"

"It's the realtor's commission," Rosamund answered. "I wouldn't touch it if I were you."

"But why does she keep it here?" Mavis asked, with a slight frisson. "So much money. Why doesn't she put it in the bank?" She pulled her wrapper tighter around her neck.

"Because it is safe there," the girl informed her. "You won't steal it, will you?"

"Of course not!" Mavis defended herself.

"Well, then," Rosamund replied. "You see?"

When Mavis awoke the following morning and made her way to the pantry, the money was still there. Limp, dog-eared twenty-dollar bills. So many she gave up counting after a few thousand.

JEAN, THE WOMAN WHO HAD SOLD her the house, paid her a visit in the late summer, just as the zinnias were at their peak. They spoke in the garden, Mavis in her hat with the green gauze, Jean in a tidy pink suit. Bees floated through the air, fat and lazy like loungers in a pool. "How are you settling in?" the realtor wanted to know.

Well, this was how they made their living, wasn't it? Mavis told herself, snipping with the clippers. Pruning with the sheers. The appearance of concern leading to referrals...

"Fine," she replied. "In fact, the truth is I just love it. There's just one

thing... Several things really."

"Oh?" Jean encouraged her.

"Some things about the house you didn't tell me," Mavis began.

"Some things I ought to have known about."

"Such as...?"

"The apiary, for instance," Mavis pointed out.

"You're not allergic to bees, are you?" Jean asked, with some alarm.

"No," Mavis replied.

"Well, then, that was a pleasant surprise," Jean concluded.

"And the West Wing."

"So you've discovered the West Wing?" the realtor asked.

"Of course!" Mavis replied.

"Not everyone does," replied Jean. "And as long as the Assessment Office doesn't, that's a real plus."

"And that reminds me!" Mavis continued. "There's this child I keep seeing at the oddest times. She's dressed as if she's about to sail on the *Titanic*. She says her name is Rosamund."

"Ah, well," the realtor replied, rising to go. "That would be my grandmother."

"Your grandmother?" Mavis asked.

"Yes, poor old sod. Lost her mother mid-Atlantic. She arrived at Fernleigh Cottage in 1913 at the age of ten..."

"You're descended from Cedric Ferneyhough?" Mavis demanded. "The man who built this house?"

"A direct descendant," Jean clarified. "What? You didn't know?" She handed Mavis a business card. *Jean Ferneyhough*, it read. Mavis had seen this card before. A friend had

given it to her; that was why she had called Jean in the first place. And weren't there all those signatures as well, on all those documents relating to the transfer of property? Yet she had never made the connection between the man who had built Fernleigh Cottage eighty years before and the woman who had sold it to her. "My great-grandfather willed me the exclusive right to list and sell Fernleigh Cottage and, over the years, that rather singular legacy has earned me a great deal of money," Jean told her now, gathering her pocketbook and her keys, preparing to leave.

"What do you mean?" Mavis demanded. "How often does the house exchange hands? I mean... I'm only fifty-four. I have no plans to leave this house. I will not die for years. What is it you want?"

"Oh," said Jean mildly, patting her hand, smiling. "Just to see how you were getting on, Mrs. Cameron. And don't worry. No one ever leaves Fernleigh Cottage. Not really. Haven't you noticed?"

THAT NIGHT MAVIS DREAMED THE secret staircase. It was at one end of her closet. How she could have not noticed it before? A narrow, very steep staircase. She could only make out the top few steps, even when she shone a flashlight down it. Wherever it led was pitch black. And where did it lead, anyway? Fernleigh Cottage's basement extended only under the kitchen and back porch. It was little more than a root cellar into which had been crowded a water heater, a furnace, a gnarled fuse box and a sump

pump. Beneath the bedrooms was nothing but crawl space...or so Jean had told her.

Mavis shut the door to the closet. If it had had a lock, she would have locked it. As it was, it was difficult for her dreaming self to sleep and even harder for her waking self to go back to sleep, knowing the staircase was there, even when she checked to see if it was, which it wasn't. The first time. The second time she checked, however, it was back. By this time, she was dreaming again.

It's my house, she told herself firmly. There's nothing about it that can hurt me...that frightens me.

Arming herself with the flashlight, she started down the stairs, sideways, because of their extreme steepness. There was something strange about the darkness into which she was descending. It was not merely the absence of light; it was the presence of an inky blackness, along with a palpable chill and a dampness... But there was something else about it, a quality that made her catch her breath with something akin to pleasure. Oh, that was it! The air was strangely ionized, like that of a mine.

After a few moments, her foot reconnoitered with something like a floor, level ground. Steadying herself with a hand against a wall of sweating clay, she inhaled deeply. The rich, vibrant air.

Then slowly a door started to creak open, half-inch by halting half-inch. A soft gray fog of light seeped into the earthen chamber in which she found herself, illuminating it dimly. It was nothing more

than a hole, dripping roots, gouged into the clay. She blinked. There was her proper basement, as might be expected. There too was Donald, standing with his back to her, inspecting the fuse box with the air of someone who finds himself at the scene of a grievous accident. She had not expected that at all.

"Whatever possessed you?" he asked softly, shaking his head. "This fuse box, Mavis. Corroded. And God only know which fuse goes with which room..."

"How did you know it was me?" Mavis wanted to know. "And what are you doing here, Donald? You're dead, in case you haven't noticed."

"Why, of course it's you. Who else would it be?" He turned to face her. "It's your house, isn't it? I mean, now that you sold my house."

"Our house!" Mavis insisted. "Well, your house really." All the while she was thinking, thank goodness he doesn't look too dead! A little ashen, perhaps. "I never liked it, Donald. Not from the moment you showed me the floor plans. And you built it anyway!"

"It was a wonderful house," Donald countered. "Shiny, brand-spanking new. No wiring to make you turn in your grave, like this place. Even had a harvest room. What a feature! Anyway, I've been expecting you."

"Well, I haven't been expecting you!" she retorted. "Now, listen to me, Donald Cameron! I was a good wife to you all those years, although God only knows how you bored me. But now you're dead and I can

live wherever I want and do whatever I want."

"Not so, Mavis," Donald contradicted her, wagging his fat finger at her in that irritatingly superior, know-it-all-way of his. "Not so at all!"

"Why?" Mavis protested. "Why not so at all?"

"Because," Donald informed her smugly, with a terrible smile, "you're about to die in your sleep, Mavis. Just the same unexpected way I did."

PATTY, THE NEIGHBOR WHOM Mavis had spoken to earlier that summer, was out watering her lawn when Jean came by with a new *For Sale* sign for Fernleigh Cottage.

"Again?" Patty asked. "What happened to that nice Mrs. Cameron?"

"Died in her sleep," Jean replied. "Apparently she had a condition. A heart condition. No one knew


about it. Not even her, apparently."

"Imagine that!" exclaimed Patty. "She wasn't so old, either. About my mother's age."

"No," replied Jean. "At least her last days were happy ones."

"Yes," Patty agreed. "She loved that house, all right." She paused, thinking. "You know, Fernleigh Cottage might be just the ticket for my mother. We're thinking of moving her down from up north. The winters are so hard up there and this way we'd all be close by."

"Well, in that case, let me give you my card," said Jean. "The house isn't listed on the Multiple Listing Service, of course. It's rather a special house, what we call an exclusive. Not for just everyone. But go ahead and give me a call. I'd be happy to show you through."

"Well, thank you," said Patty, smiling, taking the card and stuffing it in her apron pocket. "I believe I will!" 

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Hiding

Mici Gold

Like the larva
 among the leaves
Like the silent
 creature of the night
I was hiding
 You had never seen me

I had always lurked
 under the surface
of your soil
 My spreading
mycelium crept
 beneath your earth


You were content
 that I molded myself
to you and
 You thought you knew me
But I was only a moonstruck
 pool reflecting your desire
You did not peer beneath
 the silver layer of
 my face

When I decided
 to become opaque,
to cast aside my mask
 and become a real
woman that no one had
 ever seen before

(continues...)

you were scared
that I had
transmogrified,
alchemized
myself into freedom

You were angry that one
person could evolve so
many times
in one generation,
that my cocoon
had split and
let me emerge
a different species

Accuse me, then
It's on your lips
By giving birth
to myself
I have betrayed
your dreams
Because looking
at me you saw
the moon and stars
But me you still
have never seen 

Ice Crimes

Vol Ranger

“HEY HO, LET’S GO. YOU DICE ’EM, WE ICE ’EM,” Frosty said cheerfully. The dark-haired young man in the white jumpsuit slid out from underneath the ambulance. He had a little black plastic device in his hand which he set carefully on the floorboards in the cab of the ambulance unit.

The big, blocky white ambulance with the red CryoFleet seal on the hood sat waiting in the station. Frosty patted it fondly on its blunt nose.

“You know these big old boxy trucks never change,” Frosty said fondly. “No matter how sleek passenger cars get, or how streamlined space planes are, we’re still driving your basic funeral car. Too bad they’re not polished oak and brass trim anymore.”

“What are you talking about? That ambulance is solid spun silica,” Na-keesha said. “Did you call us in? It’s gone 2200 hours.”

“History, history,” Frosty said. “I’m talking about how furniture-makers got into the casket business as a sideline, on account of they must have had some extra slabs of wood lying around. Then they must’ve had some time on their hands, so they fixed up a selection of ready-made caskets.”

Frosty mimed hammering away on a series of coffins, tapping the nails in firmly in a rat-a-tat rhythm. He spun his imaginary hammer and reholstered it by his side.

“The casket inventory led to the funeral business, and into transportation of the deceased in horse-drawn hearses. Later came the horseless carriage, and then if hearse wasn’t out on a call, and if the deceased wasn’t, quite, the transition was made into transportation to hospitals. *Voilà*, the ambulance business.”

“We’re not going to be in the ambulance business if you don’t call us in,”

Nakeesha said.

"Go, go, do it, I'm ready," Frosty said cheerfully. "You stab 'em, we slab 'em. We re-frig-er-ate while you wait. Not bad." Anything was an improvement on the CryoFleet motto—preserve and protect your loved ones in time of need. "We freeze to please," Frosty tried.

Nakeesha turned her head and spoke to the clip-on device pinned to her jumpsuit. "Medic-one to Dispatch, we are clear, 1098 on station," she transmitted.

Phyllis, the dispatcher, sounded exasperated. "It's about time, Medic-one. I have you logged onto the system. Medic-one, an injured person, sector four, code 3," she said. "Medic-five, move up to your temporary post while one and twelve are out of the barn. Medic-seven, aren't you 1098 from the hospital yet?"

"Sounds like Phyllis got her job training in a taxicab company," Frosty said. He started the engine on the big ambulance unit and the station doors automatically opened. He reached down and snapped his finger against the small black device sitting between the front seats. "Medic-one, 1051 en route," he told his microphone.

"Let's roll," Nakeesha said. "We're going over the 30-second limit."

"No way," Frosty said. He nodded at the mechanism on the floorboards. "The black box says we've been moving."

"You pulled the automatic vehicle locator off the chassis? What for, Frosty?"

"The thing is too damn efficient.

I was getting too many time checks over the company standards," he said. "You know, thirty seconds to get out of the chute when you get a call, four minutes or less to get to the scene... I don't make the standard, it cuts into my paycheck. This way I make every time stamp."

The ambulance cleared the station and turned north. Frosty waited until they were passing the corner bar to flip on the strobe lights and wide-frequency siren, and gave a quick whoop of greeting to the boys as he went by.

Nakeesha flicked on her microphone. "Medic-one to dispatch, en route sector four, state location of incident and nature of injury."

"Medic-one, see the officer at the command post, corner Prince and First, shots fired. Scene is reported not secure, repeat, not secure."

"You kill 'em, we chill 'em," Frosty said happily. "Gonna be a cool time in the old town tonight."

Nakeesha pulled a protective gear pack from the rack under the dashboard and began to put it on. She slipped her arms through the paper gown and leaned forward against the drag of her seatbelt to fasten it with velcro tabs in the back. She slipped on latex gloves, and donned the combination clear plastic face shield and filter mask.

"There's the command post," she said, her voice muffled by the mask.

The blue and silver strobe lights flashed from the roofs of the police cars. The cars had been hastily pulled into a rough circle, and uniformed officers with gas guns crouched inside the ring. An officer with a loud-hailer was barking com-

mands to a group of civilians down the street. "Get clear," he was shouting. "Go into your homes. Clear the street."

Frosty cast an experienced eye over the terrain. There was room to swing past the cop clump if you didn't mind riding half on the sidewalk and took care to jink past the post office storage mailbox. The crowd was just neighborhood, some punks, no weapons in sight. The victim was face down on the street, just the way she landed, seemed like, and having her face in the pool of blood that showed black in the moonlight couldn't be doing her any good. Frosty killed the siren and gunned the truck past the cops.

"Jesus, what're you doing?" Nakeesha screamed.

"Goin' in," Frosty grunted. "She's sucking blood."

"Who cares?" Nakeesha said. "You're going to get us killed."

"Sheeit." Frosty clipped the corner of the mailbox and sent it flying. Envelopes scattered all over the block like pamphlets dropped from an airplane. "Hope those weren't the government sustenance checks."

The ambulance pulled up, reversed, and stopped a few feet from the victim. "Medic-one, 1097 at the scene," Nakeesha told dispatch automatically.

Frosty opened his door and stepped out. A large hand pressed against his chest stopped his forward advance.

"Hold it," the man said. "You don't touch her."

Frosty stood relaxed. "You know her?" he asked.

"She's my woman."

Voices muttered from the crowd. Standing in the pool of light from the ambulance cab, it was hard to see what could be happening out there in the neighborhood.

"If I tell you some things to do that might help her, can you touch her for me?" Frosty asked calmly.

The man drew back. "I can't help her. She's shot up all through."

Frosty nodded agreement. "I understand she's shot. What we can do is cool her down until we can get her into the hospital. How long ago did it happen?"

"About an hour. Fuckin' cops set up there and wouldn't even come down the street to see could they help."

"I came in to help," Frosty said. He moved slowly toward the patient. The big man put out a hand to stop him, but didn't complete the gesture. Frosty knelt down on the street next to the bleeding woman.

"What's her name?" he asked. He pulled a pair of latex gloves out of his back jumpsuit pocket and slipped them on while he looked carefully along the length of her body.

The entrance wound was in the middle of her back. The plastic fabric of her blue jacket had been sucked partly into the wound and was helping to close the tissue. The exit wound would be worse. The pool of blood beneath her was still spreading. Bubbles showed around her mouth where she was exhaling into the puddle.

"Name's Wayla."

Frosty reached out and felt carefully along the back of her neck, then put both hands on her cheeks and slowly turned her head to one

side. He felt for a pulse in her neck and peeled back her eyelids to look at her pupils.

"Wayla's got a chance if we hurry," Frosty said. "We need to put her in the tank. Can you help me pull it out?"

"Will it...hurt her? I don't want to hurt her," the man said.

"Wayla's not feeling anything right now. She's deeply unconscious, which is a real good thing for her," Frosty said.

Nakeesha was crouched inside the patient compartment in the truck, ready to hand out the cryogenic tank. "You idiot," she hissed to Frosty.

"Set the tank pressure to max," he said. "We're going to load and go. Get up front in the driver's seat."

The stainless steel tank on wheels was lowered from the ambulance. Frosty took it around and lined it up next to the patient. He opened the lid and a puff of white gas was released. There was a slightly convex plastic backboard inside, which he pulled out and slid partly under the patient.

"We need to lift Wayla onto the plastic board," he said. "I'll take her head and you take her feet. As soon as she's on the board, I'll count to three. On three we lift her up into the tank. Don't hesitate if she moves or cries out. Do you understand?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, go." The blood pool released the body with a sucking sound. Parts of tissue and skin clung to the pavement. They slid what stayed with the main part onto the board. The movement caused the woman to jerk into a reflexive posture.

"One, two, three," Frosty counted. The man lifted belatedly but got his end into the tank. Frosty looked carefully at the alignment of the body before he closed the lid slowly.

"Into the ambulance, now," he said. He hopped into the back and let the man take the burden of pushing the tank towards him. He locked it into place with the middle clamp of three and turned to close the rear doors.

"Go," he told Nakeesha calmly.

"Medic-one, 1051 en route to the hospital," she transmitted. She pulled past the police command post and hit the siren. One of the cops swung his gas gun around to bear on the ambulance and shouted angrily.

"Jesus, Frosty, you're crazy. That guy could've killed you with one swat of his hand. Even if he didn't, the police might have."

Frosty was putting a fresh pair of gloves on and getting into a gown and mask. He took an antiseptic wipe and cleaned a smear of blood off the tank before he fastened the remaining two clamps.

"Medic-one to dispatch," Frosty said over his microphone. "Patch me through to medical control."

"Snowman, this is medical control, what's happening?" the voice came back.

"Hey, Top Doc, I got a popsicle for you, ETA five minutes."

"What flavor?"

"Cherry red, your favorite. Gun-shot wound to the back, trajectory slightly upward, we brought you most of the gut but maybe left a few bits and pieces of lung behind, sorry

about that but we had to scoop and run. Glasgow Coma Score of three, decerebrate posturing, and I've got her on flash freeze."

"Is she beautiful?"

"A smash." Frosty grinned. "Literally."

"Okay, the team's on alert. Is she at least rich?"

"Sorry, Top Doc, this one's for the good of your soul."

The ambulance backed up to the ramp and Frosty unpopped the rear doors. "Medic-one, 1097 at the hospital," Nakeesha said.

"Medic-one, what took you so long? Come back 1098 to me," the dispatcher said promptly. "I need you in sector two."

Frosty was pushing the tank out the doors to the waiting orderlies. They poked a replacement tank at him and he rolled it on board. "Oh, shit," he said.

"Medic-one to dispatch, we are 1098, clear at the hospital," Nakeesha said obediently.

"The hell we are, I need a piss break," Frosty complained, but he closed the doors as Nakeesha backed them out.

"Medic-one, injured person, sector two, code three, Fifth and Market, motor vehicle crash, rescue on scene. Medic-five, sector three, code three, a stabbing, see the caller at the telephone booth for exact location. Medic-twelve, move up to your temporary post by way of Queen's Street, maybe you can pick one off on the way."

"Phyllis is compulsive," Frosty said. "I think it's a job requirement that dispatchers have to be anal-retentive."

He moved forward through the patient compartment and slid into the front passenger seat.

"Medic-one is 1051 to sector two," Nakeesha recited.

"You crash 'em, we flash 'em," Frosty sang.

The crash was evident from a distance because of the fire trucks clustered around the intersection. A police officer was directing traffic against the lights and waved them on through. Two formerly sleek cars lay crumpled together, windshield to windshield.

"Nose to nose, where the engine blocks ended up, nobody knows," Frosty said. He snapped off his gloves and pulled on a new pair.

"Medic-one is 1097 at the scene," Nakeesha reported.

The rescue crews were cranking up a portable generator to power a Hurst tool and spring open the car doors on one car. Firemen were already peeling back the roof on the other. Frosty could see movement inside.

"We extricate while you wait," he caroled.

The rescue paramedics had a cervical collar on the driver and were starting the IV when Frosty peered over their shoulders. "Medic-one," he said. "What's happening?"

"One in each vehicle," the paramedic reported. "The other one's dead on scene. Decapitation'll do that to you. We're just trying to pry the rest of him out so the tow can go and clear the roadway. This one'll have good pressure until we get the car off his lap, then he's going to bottom out, so we were waiting until you got here with the tank."

"You got it," Frosty said. He moved around the paramedic to talk to the patient. "How do you feel?" he asked.

The young man looked at him wildly. "What's happening to me?"

"You had a head-on car accident. What's your name?"

"Am I okay? What're you doing to me? Get me out!"

"We're getting you out. When we move the seat back, you might pass out, so we want to be able to move you quickly and safely. I'm going to slip this plastic board down behind your back—can you feel that?"

"No."

Nakesha shook her head.

"Tank ready?" Frosty glanced to the side. She had the stainless steel tank tipped on end and latched open, so the seated patient could be transferred into it in his present position.

"We're going to put you in a special stretcher to carry you to the hospital. It'll be cold and you'll go to sleep."

The fire department crew chief had his hand on the seat lever. Another man held a pry bar and a jack ready.

"At my signal, then lift on three," Frosty said. "Go."

The patient's face whitened suddenly and his head lolled back against the cervical collar. "One-two-three," Frosty said urgently, and they lifted him into the tank. He slammed the lid shut.

"Okay, pressurize to high," he said. "You think they're going to want those feet?"

"Too much crush injury to reattach them, I think," the fire depart-

ment paramedic said, "but I'll put them in a bag for you just in case. You want to put them in the tank with him?"

"No, I don't want to reopen it. Let's go, somebody's got work to do."

"Medic-one, 1051 en route to the hospital," Frosty said. He slid into the driver's seat and kicked the small black device between the seats with his foot. It rolled over. "Damn," he said. "The frigging magnets don't hold through that rubber floor mat. I'm in trouble now."

"Medic-one, your automatic vehicle locator shows you are upside down," dispatch said. "Did you wreck?"

Frosty sighed. "That's negative, dispatch. The AVL must be defective. I'll put into maintenance and repair for a new one. Shove me through to medical control."

"Medical control to Medic-one, what you got in the cooler, Snowman?"

"My lunch, Top Doc, and a couple of feet. In the tank I got the owner of the feet, who probably wants them back."

"Do I want the full microsurgery team on alert, Snowman, or do I get by with the orthopedic intern to nip off the protruding bony bits?"

"That'll probably do it. You got any ambulance-chasers hanging out tonight?"

"Yeah, I saw one in the break room a few minutes ago. I'll put him on alert. Think the patient needs a shyster more than he needs a sawbones, do you, Snowman?"

"That's a true bill, Top Doc. ETA

in three."

Frosty backed the ambulance up to the dock and picked up the AVL. He grinned, shook it violently, and put it in his pocket. "Medic-one 1097 at the hospital," he transmitted.

Too bad Phyllis, the dispatcher, had no sense of humor. The last time Frosty had removed the AVL from the undercarriage of the ambulance, he had tossed it into the harbor. Marty, the dispatcher that night, had next addressed him as "Submarine-one."

Nakeesha and Frosty followed the tank into the Emergency Department. A few patients with minor injuries were sitting on gurneys but the majority of the trauma room was filled with stainless steel tanks similar to theirs.

After research proved it was far more important to provide cerebral resuscitation than cardiopulmonary resuscitation, paramedics froze patients in whatever condition they found them in the field. The tanks kept the patients in cryonic suspension until the surgeon could provide definitive care in the operating room.

"Hey, Snowman!" A wiry-looking man in a surgical green scrub suit greeted them. He was wearing a fluorescent pink gimme cap with the words *Code Boss* imprinted. "This the double amputee?"

"In the flesh."

"Well, park him in bay four. I told the lawyer to stand by."

"How's the Saturday night knife and gun club, Top Doc?"

"You can see we've got a full house." He thumped the top of one

tank. "A fine case of traumatic pneumonectomy in bay three. A technically challenging plastics case over there. That gunshot wound you brought us is in the OR and looking good. But the one that gets top billing tonight is this one—"

Whang!

A bullet glanced off the top of the stainless steel tank and ricocheted into a surgical tray. The instruments clattered to the floor.

Frosty and Top Doc hit the floor simultaneously. Nakeesha had beat them to it and rolled into a protected spot behind the tank. Frosty and the doctor kicked off, one in each direction, and took cover behind other obstacles. Frosty wasn't too happy with his choice of a surgical drape and a laundry cart.

"Is it me he doesn't like?"

"I think it's a patient," the doctor said.

"Which tank is he shooting at?"

Frosty asked. The whang of a second shot convinced him it was the one right next to his own precious fragile bony skull.

"Crisis? Ice-us," Frosty muttered. "What's the deal?"

"He's trying to finish her off," the doctor whispered. "The tank's a medical examiner's case, a felony murder. The family got an injunction to freeze her. They want to thaw her out and patch her up long enough to testify."

Frosty peered out from behind the drape. Patients and emergency department staff had scattered and run out of the trauma room. The abandoned cryonic tanks hissed quietly. The gunman had control of the ambulance entrance, and gestured

with his weapon at the doctor.

"You there with the hat," the gunman said. "Get up."

"What do you want?" Top Doc asked calmly.

"You an important guy, Boss. You coming with me. Get behind of that tank and let's roll. I got my gun trained right on your head."

The doctor rose. Frosty gestured quickly to Nakeesha and took the AVL from his pocket. Top Doc saw him out of the corner of his eye and pretended to stumble against the tank. Frosty tossed Nakeesha the device and pantomimed sticking it to the tank. There was a soft snick as the magnets made contact.

"Move it, Boss," the gunman said impatiently. "I got people waiting on this delivery. Out the back, out the back, I got a truck at the ramp. You guys there, tell the cops I got a hostage, so no funny stuff."

Frosty watched them go through the door and turned quickly to his microphone. "Medic-one to dispatch," he said urgently. "Tell the officers responding to the hospital that the suspect has taken a physician hostage along with the patient he kidnapped. Track my AVL. Repeat, follow the AVL."

"Medic-one, come back to me. What are you talking about?" Phyllis said irritably. "I don't care if you've put your automatic vehicle locator up your—there's a what? 10-23, Medic-one, stand by, I have traffic from police dispatch. All units, 10-23."

"Come on," Frosty said, heading for the ambulance. "Bring that spare tank." Nakeesha shook her head but followed him out. They

rolled the tank on board and buckled in.

"Medic-one, we understand a signal 44A your location. Police dispatch asks if the hostage is carrying your AVL."

"Medic-one to dispatch. The patient who was abducted is carrying the AVL. State current location of patient."

"Medic-one, the system shows you are in sector five, Vine and Magnolia, heading west on Vine at a high rate of speed. Police are in pursuit. SWAT team is scrambled code red."

"Medic-one, 1051 en route," Frosty said calmly.

"Jesus, Frosty, what can we do?" Nakeesha asked. She automatically pulled out a protective gear pack and began to gown and glove.

"They may toss Top Doc out now that they're clear of the scene," Frosty said. "If they shot him, we'll pot him."

The ambulance turned west on Vine and accelerated. "I don't see them," he said to Nakeesha. "Medic-one to dispatch, give me a quick fix."

"Dispatch to Medic-one, you are in sector six, now west on Oak. Police are closing in. Suspect vehicle is a blue van running with no lights. Police report they are firing at the tires."

"Medic-one, going Code 3," Frosty radioed. He flipped the lights and siren on as he made the turn onto Oak. "No sense trying to sneak up on them now," he told Nakeesha.

The ambulance rocketed along. Frosty could see the police cars ahead, weaving back and forth for

position. The van was hard to see in the darkness.

"Dispatch to Medic-one, police advise there is a 10-38 roadblock, set up at the county line road."

"Uh-oh," Frosty said. "If he's smart, he'll stop and negotiate, assuming he's still got a live hostage to negotiate with. Why do I get the feeling he's not flash? He's going to crash that roadblock."

He could see it coming. A line of police cars was drawn up across the road. The fleeing van hesitated momentarily, then sped up. It tried to cut around the end of the line and went into a skid sideways, slid off the road into a ditch, and rolled over twice before coming to rest on its tires, which deflated in slow motion.

"Sheeit," Frosty said. He pulled the ambulance to a stop on the shoulder of the road above the van. He made no move to unsnap his seatbelt.

"Aren't you going to get out?" Nakeesha asked.

"Medic-one to dispatch, 1097 on scene," Frosty reported. "Waiting for clearance to proceed."

Police in riot gear with drawn weapons made a perimeter survey of the wrecked van. A searchlight was brought to bear on the scene. One officer in a full-length protective bulletproof garment wiggled with some effort up to the rear of the truck. He jerked back in surprise when the rear door opened.

The doctor looked out. He ignored the cop and held his hand over his eyes, trying to see past the searchlights' focus on the van. He had lost his *Code Boss* hat somewhere along

the way.

"Snowman, you out there?" he called.

Frosty popped out of the ambulance. "Right here, Top Doc," he yelled. "What you got?"

"Bring your trauma kit and the old CPR stuff," Top Doc bellowed. He turned to the cop. "You, help me get her out of here. He pulled the plug on the tank and she's thawing out."

"What? What?" the cop said. "What about the gunman?"

"Oh, him. Wasn't wearing his seatbelt," the doctor said negligently. "C-1 fracture, snapped his neck. Can't do anything about that even if we freeze him. Didn't your mother ever tell you that crime doesn't pay? Come on, pull this damn tank out."

Frosty tugged the orange plastic tool kit that held the trauma gear out of its locker in the ambulance. He tossed a few bags of IV fluids and the drug box on top of it, and grabbed the portable defibrillator-cardiac monitor.

"What's the CPR stuff?" Nakeesha asked.

"I've got an old ambu bag and some endotracheal tubes in here somewhere," Frosty muttered. "Take that oxygen canister. Here's the wrench."

"Aren't you going to tank her?"

"Can't, if she's thawed. We'll have to work on her hot."

They careened down slope. Top Doc had the lid of the tank open and was performing manual CPR, compressing the victim's chest rhythmically and puffing air into her mouth. Frosty got a tube in her

throat quickly and took over, mechanically ventilating with an ambu bag. He grabbed the nearest cop and showed him how to compress the rubber football-shaped device to force air into her lungs.

Frosty slapped the electrode pads on and connected the monitor. No rhythm.

"Like this," Top Doc showed Nakeesha how to do chest compressions. "At the lower third of the sternum. Okay, Snowman, get some fluid into her so we can see where's she's leaking. Is that the biggest catheter you've got? Push it, push it. You take much longer even I'm not going to be able to save her."

Frosty got two IVs started and squeezed one bag of fluid with his hands to force the flow rate. He positioned the second bag between his shoulder and the tank lid and leaned on it.

"Okay, we got a through-and-through wound in the left shoulder, all meat," Top Doc said. "Put a trauma pack over that, Snowman, thanks. We got a chest wound, that lung's not inflating too good, probable hemothorax. What you got in the way of a thoracotomy tray?"

"Not a whole hell of a lot," Frosty said. He handed the IV bags to the next gawking cop. "Hold 'em up, up!" he said.

Frosty dug through the box. "Needle for jet insufflation," he offered.

"Sold," Top Doc said. He peeled back the sterile paper wrapping and inserted the hypodermic needle carefully beneath a rib. Dark red

fluid squirted out. "Gimme a 60-cc syringe."

"I'm getting tired," Nakeesha panted.

The doctor sucked out a syringe-full of blood and squirted it onto the ground. The cop holding the bags flinched and took a step back. Top Doc drained the chest again. "Stop a minute," he told Nakeesha. "All right! We've got a pulse."

The cardiac monitor showed a normal sinus rhythm. "Good job," Top Doc said. "Tape this, Snowman." He left the needle in place and bent over the patient's chest with a stethoscope, listening intently.

Frosty unrolled tape and bit it off, taped the needle against the patient's chest wall. "We ready to roll?" he asked.


"Straight to the operating room, do not pass go," the doctor said.

They rolled the open tank up-slope and into the back of the ambulance. Top Doc climbed in the back to help along the way. Frosty thumped the AVL that was still stuck to the bottom of the tank.

"Medic-one to dispatch," Frosty radioed. "We are 10-51 from the scene, proceeding code 3 to the hospital, trauma alert for gunshot wounds to the chest, no cryogenics, repeat no ice, ETA 10 minutes."

"So how do you figure her chances?" Frosty asked.

"No problem," Top Doc shrugged.

Frosty stripped off his gloves and tossed them in the trash. "When you're hot, you're hot," he grinned. 

The Quiet Village

Joy Hewittt Mann

“LOOK. OH, JUST LOOK AT IT!” ADRIELLA CRIED, blocking the old man’s way, dancing in the center of the dirt road that led to his village. “Trees like wild maidens; rocks like old skulls. Living grass. Breathing earth.”

She spun around, shoulder-length black hair soaring out like a raven’s ruff.

“What a place. What a wonderful magical place.”

The old man started for the side of the road. He was holding the reins of a horse, but the horse refused to move and continued to stare intently at Adriella.

“You live here?” she asked. “Aren’t you just deliriously happy to live here, you lovely man?”

The old man snorted and tugged on the reins. “Never thought much ’bout it.” The horse pulled back and the man stumbled.

“Easy, boy. Stop waving your arms, will you, Miss. You’re scaring my horse.”

“Sorry. But it’s just so *wonderful* here.”

Her arms with a mind of their own rose again and set her Junoesque body spinning like a teetotum.

“The beauty of it. The air. The earth. This place begs to be put on canvas.”

The man acquiesced to his horse’s wishes and joined him in the middle of the road. “She’s nice enough, Miss. But she’s just land.”

“Just land! Are you blind?” Adriella came to a stop and her hands rested on her wide hips. “Is there no poetry in your soul? Your horse appears to have more poetry than you.”

She stared at the horse, who stared back at her, and she felt suddenly awkward, a most unusual state for Adriella. Her hands dropped to her long

skirt. She smoothed it and then shoved her large hands deep into her pockets.

"Aye," the old man nodded. He smiled and a flash of something lit up his browned and wrinkled face. "Henry likes a good romp through the clover. He's partial to daisies and butterflies. I think that's how it happened."

"What happened?" Adriella asked.

"His foot, Miss." The man pointed to the horse's right hind hoof. The horse lifted it and put it down again carefully, letting out a little sigh.

"As I said, Henry's partial to butterflies, and he was watching one rather than where he was going." He gave the horse a kindly but exasperated look. "He stepped his foot in a hole, which is why I'm leading 'stead of riding." He rubbed the horse's nose and that *something* sparkled in his eyes again. "Henry's a poet, but a clumsy one."

Adriella looked back at the fellow poet with sympathy. "I hope he'll be all right? You won't have to shoot him, will you?"

The old man's brows rose up, the horse whinnied, and the world around them seemed to shimmer in and out of focus for a split second.

"Oh no, Miss! Only a sprain, I'm sure. Keep him in a stall for a bit." He ran a hand into the horse's mane. "No romping in the clover for you for a while, Henry, my boy."

Adriella's left hand shot out of a pocket and startled both horse and man. "I'm Adriella Newstead. *Artiste*."

The old man reached out his own hand slowly, "Ben MacIntosh,

Miss," and eyed her hand suspiciously before giving it a quick grab and run.

"May I walk with you?" Adriella asked.

The man frowned and rubbed his eyebrows, as if contemplating a weighty decision. Again, the trees around them shimmered.

"I guess it's all right with me. 'S'all right with you, Henry?" The horse nodded its head and a small breath whistled from its wide nostrils. "Henry says okay, but no arm waving, mind."

As they walked, Adriella commented on the types of flowers and trees they passed, pointing out birds and quick shadows moving between them. Her words wound her up slowly, gathering speed as they approached the village, until the man and horse appeared to be walking with a human windmill.

"Look," Adriella cried. "All stone. The buildings are all stone. Imagine the craftsmen—big, strapping Scotsmen—cutting the stones and dragging them here. Through swamps. Past raving wolves. Such strength. Such bravery. Oh, isn't it just too wonderful?"

Ben had a most worried look on his face. "I don't think she's about to stop, do you, Henry?" The horse shook his head.

Suddenly, Adriella's whirling arms stopped and swung to point at 3:15. "Mullioned windows! Oh, my God, look! Real mullioned windows."

She ran across the street, skirt flying, hair sticking to her face. She stopped at the window and peered in, brushing her unruly hair aside.

Ben cried, "I must be going, Miss." Henry neighed loudly. "Nice talking...to you."

"Goodbye, Ben. Goodbye, Henry. I'll be thinking about you."

Ben's brown face blanched to beige.

HE AND HENRY WATCHED AS Adriella whirled into the shop and both jumped as the draft drew the door shut with a clang of bells.

Ben shook his head. "That young woman'll be the death of this village. You mark my words, Henry."

Henry continued to stare at the closed door.

"Don't you go getting no strange ideas, Henry, my boy. You know what thought did to you. And you know as well as I do what thought like hers'll do to this village."

Ben watched, perplexed, as Henry walked over to a window box, clipped off some flowers with his large teeth, and then tenderly lay them in front of the shop door.

"Henry, you're a horse, dammit. H-O-R-S-E. Horse."

Ben waited as Henry hobbled over and then put a consoling arm over his shoulder. "Lookit, boy. I am sorry, you know. We had no choice, an' looks like we'll have no choice with this...Adriella, neither. Something's gotta be done, quick-like. A meeting, I think." He shivered. "Did I really *say* that? She's addled us both, Henry." He looked around him. "Yep. A village meeting. And soon."

Ben marched off decisively with Henry following, head down, heaving tiny, poetic sighs.

THREE DAYS LATER, BY THE TIME the meeting was held, Adriella had visited every shop in the village and made herself very much at home. Ben brought the meeting to order and called for questions from the floor. The main question on the tongues of most villagers there was voiced by Mrs. Bent, proprietress of the village's inn.

"How be she find us in the first place? She be whirling in like a bat outa hell, bringing all her thoughts with her, an' I don't like it one bit. How be it happen? I would like to know."

Farmer Frink, who lived at the farthest border of the village, answered boldly. "I ast her that. Saw her; ast her. She has a strange way of talkin', this Adriella."

The name was passed around and handled amidst a lot of muttering and groaning. "Addled, more like," someone said.

Farmer Frink continued. "Way I understand it, she got off the bus at the wrong place—sketchin' or somethin'—and jest lost her senses for a while. Prob'ly backed in while she weren't thinkin'."

"That'd do it," someone yelled, and everyone murmured in agreement.

"She says she was lookin' out the window and jest yelled, 'Stop!' When I sees her, she's runnin' round like a dervish, talkin' to herself a mile a minute 'bout the scenery. The driver just left her there, she tol' me. She turned round and the bus had jest disappeared."

A murmur rippled over the crowd. Someone yelled, "Lucky bus. Probably drivin' everyone in it

outa their minds with her insane chatter."

Farmer Frink sat down, and like the different notes on a calliope, villagers popped up and down in turn, voicing their small complaints.

"She just spins into my shop," said Mabel Early eventually, "and starts to jabbering right away. 'Oh, oh,' she says. 'Oh look at *this*, oh look at *that*,' she says. She's picking up everything. Smelling. Looking. My heart's going right queer. I get to feeling she might like to *taste* something, like she was actually... *thinking* about it."

Her neighbor hugged her as she sat down, and for a few seconds, everyone was silent.

Mabel continued talking from her chair. "I asked her, 'Are you going to buy anything, miss?' 'Yes, oh, yes,' she says. 'I'll buy a...I'll buy...' and then she just starts to spinning again. For a full two minutes more!"

Fran Spit, the potter, stood up. She was shaking. "By the goddess, if there's a way to get rid of her short of murder, I'm all for it. She's driving me crazy. Everyday she's into my pottery shop, going on and on about the shapes and colors on my shelves and I can't get anything done on my wheel, at all. I was never conscious of what I was doing before, never noticed the shape or color, just did what I've always done. Now I'm getting..." she shivered, "conscious." The ominous words fell into the still room.

"I may be, too," a small voice said. Doctor MacIntosh, Ben's older brother, stood up slowly. "This morning I smelled some of

my herbs." He sat down quickly as a gasp blew out from the crowd.

Mabel Early hung her head and spoke so softly everyone leaned forward to hear. "And I have had a..." They leaned further. "A...*thought*." Two people fell off their chairs and everyone started to talk at once.

Ben pounded with his gavel. "Order. Order! One at a time."

He looked over at Mrs. Bent in the far corner of the room, the one villager who had spoken first. "She's staying with you, Mrs. Bent?"

"Yes, she be that. She had money to pay with. Strange coin, but I could see was true coin. Well, however rich she be, there is no getting round what everyone say. She be driving us all mad. Something must be done. We been a quiet village for over three hundred years. No vehicle, no city person has disturbed us in all that time. I still don't right understand how be she got in," Mrs. Bent shook her head. "You can't just wander in, you know."

Ben said, "When that woman's whirling and yattering she's like a force of Nature."

Farmer Frink cut in. "It was like I said. She jest spun in."

"Well, she will just have to spin *out*," Mrs. Bent cried, and everyone started yelling again.

"Quiet! Order!" Ben screamed. By Goddess, he thought. Something must be done. Now.

And all eyes followed Ben's and stared out the northwest window of the meeting hall and down the thin trail that melted into the woods. Like before, Ben thought. Like Henry.

THE PLANK DOOR OF THE SMALL house in the woods trembled under the assault of a dozen fists. "Enough, already," it yelled back from a mouth-shaped knothole. "Give her a minute, you unruly mob."

The villagers stepped back and waited, trying to fight off the Adriella-induced words that threaded through their unconscious minds. The door opened into a bright room and they all grimaced as their forest-shadowed eyes accustomed to the light. The men pulled off their hats and peered around anxiously. Candles glowed on every surface in the room.

"About time." A woman's voice hovered in the one dark corner. "I've been feeling your minds for five days now."

"Good morrow, Witch Hazlick," Ben said, making himself the spokesperson. "We have a problem ...again."

"And you wish my assistance. Again."

Ben shuffled his feet and clutched his hat tightly against his chest. "If you will. It's only a small thing. A woman. An...artist."

Witch Hazlick laughed, "A poet and now an artist. What? A musician next?" Her hand waved from the gloom. "I cannot spell the same spell twice, as you know." Sometimes it was so much harder being a one-way witch. "Do you wish this woman...gone? Changed? Altered in some way?" She huffed in exasperation. "When I cast this village I never imagined so much upkeep."

Mabel Early pushed out from the crowd, keeping her eyes cast down

at the floor. "Begging your pardon, Witch Hazlick, she's a nice enough woman. We don't wish her harmed. We wouldn't even want her gone if she stopped going on so. She's—"

"Raisin' our consciousnesses," Ben cut in.

Everyone turned and looked at Ben, nodding in agreement, and marveling at Ben's *big* word. Ben smiled.

"Oh, that *is* a problem," Witch Hazlick said. "You do not think, therefore you are."

Ben stepped closer to the shadow. "If you'd just...quiet her down a mite. Settle her mind to other things."

Witch Hazlick floated out from the shadowed corner. The villagers stepped back with a gasp and then sighed in relief as they saw the comely shape the witch had taken on.

Witch Hazlick smiled. "Other things, you say. There is a way, of course. A simple way." She floated toward a back room. The door opened and closed without assistance and in a few seconds, Witch Hazlick returned with a small stoppered bottle in her hand.

"Give her this to drink. In tea." She turned to Mrs. Bent, who shivered under her amused gaze. "In some herb tea in your parlor, just before bedtime." Mrs. Bent took the bottle with a trembling hand. "For Goddess' sake, don't drop it!" Witch Hazlick said, and Mrs. Bent trembled more, clutching the small bottle between her heaving breasts.

Witch Hazlick beckoned Ben with a red-tipped finger. He moved cautiously forward and shook his head as she whispered into his ear.

"But I couldn't," he said. "It wouldn't be fair to either of them."

"Do as I say, Ben MacIntosh. It is the only way to render a woman truly unconscious of everything around her."

"If you say so, Witch Hazlick, but I do it unwillingly. Seems a cruel trick to play."

"Tis no trick. And, you will see, it is far from cruel."

BEN AND HENRY WERE STANDING just outside the village under a very large apple tree.

"She swears it'll do no harm, Henry." Ben looked at the horse sympathetically. "The way you've been mooning around, I thought you'd welcome the idea."

The horse shook his head and rolled his large eyes with worry.

"She says Adriella will not be harmed. Mrs. Bent will give her the magic potion before bed."

The tree above them began to shimmer in and out of focus.

"For Goddess' sake," Ben said, "stop *thinking* about it."

They both jumped at a familiar voice. "Thinking about what?" Adriella asked.

Henry whinnied in welcome and Adriella stroked his nose, staring up at the tree. "Oh, what an absolutely wonderful apple tree. It almost sparkles."

Ben cleared his throat. "Henry and me was just thinking about how to get them apples."

Adriella laughed. "Oh, you silies. You just reach up and take one." She did so and held it out to Henry, who stared at it, turning his head from side to side. Then he

looked into her eyes.

Adriella blushed, then blushed again at her blushing. She coughed. "Yes. It is a beautiful apple." She held it up to the sun and the aura around it made it a thing of beauty. "A thing of beauty is a joy forever," she said, and Henry neighed, nodding his head.

Adriella took a huge bite of the apple and held it out to Henry, who consumed it in tiny bites, looking at Adriella all the while. Adriella stroked his ears with her free hand.

"Well," Ben said. "It looks like you've changed your mind. Am I right, Henry?"

Henry nodded his head up and down as he continued to eat beauty.

"Changed his mind about what?" Adriella asked.

"Oh, nothing important." Ben said. "Doesn't even bear *thinking* about." And he laughed at his own joke.

DOWNSTAIRS, IN MRS. BENT'S parlor, a dozen or so villagers were gathered, including Ben, his brother, Farmer Frink, Fran Spit and Mabel Early. They could sense Witch Hazlick's spirit hovering, assuring them that no harm would be done.

Mrs. Bent said, "Oh, I do hope we be doing the right thing. The poor girl."

Mabel Early consoled her, "The magic potion will keep her from harm, and if all works out her mind will be on other things than us and our village. That's the important thing. We can't have her *thinking* us away."

"That be most true, but Henry is

a horse. I mean, his feelings be human enough, but his form be..." Mrs. Bent shivered in disgust.

Ben cut in, "If the magic works as it should, he will be a horse for only a little while longer."

Mrs. Bent almost screamed, "But he be doing the unimaginable in that *little* while!" She shivered again.

Dr. MacIntosh spoke quietly. "I can assure you, my dear, that though Henry *is* a horse, he has a... very small...ah, you know. Small male parts. For a horse, that is." He cleared his throat. "Think of it as our own *Midsummer Night's Dream*."

"But it be almost fall," Mrs. Bent said.

Everyone laughed nervously and then fell silent as a crash of hooves and then a loud groan echoed down the stairs.

"Oh my," Mrs. Bent said.

"By jiggers," from Farmer Frink.

Mabel Early turned pale, Fran Spit swore quietly, and Dr. MacIntosh looked at his watch.

"Well, it wasn't a scream, at least," Ben said.

IT WAS AS IF ADRIELLA'S LIMBS were not her own. Her legs felt huge, her buttocks twice their normal healthy size. She found herself bent over by some uncontrollable force and, willing herself to run away on hands and feet, found herself unable to move forward. She was backing toward him, her head turned to watch his approach.

It was not like being outside herself and watching unconcerned as her body did these things. She was

there, and sickened by her feelings of excitement. She was trembling with excitement as she stretched her hind quarters wide and welcomed Henry in. She heard her breath escape her lips in an ecstatic whinny.

Oh, God! Oh, God! All feeling of nausea at the thought of what she was letting happen soared from her head as the waves of orgasmic pleasure crested and fell, crested and fell. *Too much! Too much!* was her last thought as her mind drifted away.

"YOU'RE NOT USUALLY AT A LOSS for words, Adriella," Henry said. "And have I told you how much I love that name? Ad-ri-ella. Such a wonderfully poetic name. Henry is so *ordinary* for a poet, don't you think?"

Henry and Adriella lay in bed together: Henry, the poet, now a man again, and thinking of nothing but Adriella; and Adriella, *artiste*, a woman in love, without a single conscious thought in her head.

"You are much changed, Henry," Adriella said.

"Not completely." Henry moved toward her. "I was small for a horse, but for a man..." He smiled.

Adriella smiled back. "I think..." Adriella began.

WITCH HAZLICK HOVERED IN A corner of the parlor thinking how well she had handled things, considering. Although poor Ben would miss his horse.

Mrs. Bent sat in her chair, by the fire, and smiled. Not thinking at all. ♣

Millipede Lessons

Terry Hayman

ME AND PEANUT, THE OLD GUY ASSIGNED TO ME, WERE only down one level in the millipede tunnels and I was already sweating. Not just from the thick air. Our only eyes were radar goggles with IR sets, everything in shadow colors. Our only defenses were the charge guns we carried, one each, with a dozen backup batteries.

Laughable for an extraction.

But Peanut kept on talking like this was nothing. Just another training exercise.

I shivered and swept a line of sweat off my forehead.

"Necessity, kid," Peanut said as he held up a hand and grinned. He reared up and crashed his right boot through the crust of goo and rock in the left-hand wall then widened the hole with more kicks. "You get a pede doing a mid-life bug-out and you have to go in. Otherwise pedes sense we can't control them, then...shit. Year One of occupation, five or six nests bugged out together. Freaking mess. Two Keeper stations wiped out."

"Uh-unh," I grunted, swallowing a sour taste that kept coming up in my mouth.

We were scanning the little ovoid den by that time. The millipede that'd "bugged out" and attacked a Keeper station, then dived wildly all over the place after being driven off, had been seen entering this colony just ten minutes ago. So we'd suited and gone in after it, dropped into the entrance hole, kicking our way into every den we hit, looking for fresh trail.

This den seemed clear.

Still, the milky sour stink was strong. And the grit in the air kept tickling

little coughs out of both of us. Problem was the pedes sometimes liked to chew their ways into and through the walls of these little pocket dens. Kind of an oral fixation. Not that their bodies used the wall material; they just kind of ground it down, slimed it with milky goop, and pumped it out their sphincters. Saw one do that to a stupid Keeper on a picto they showed us in our Keeper training. Only, almost nothing of the Keeper came out the other end. Their bodies did use meat.

"Tapping," Peanut coughed from under his helmet. "Cover me."

He reached into his belt to pulled out a tapper, a Keeper's personal sounding device that gave you a quick and dirty scan of a pede wall's integrity. Also caught the movers, pedes chewing quietly through walls in the hopes of coming out behind your position and chewing you. That simple stratagem had just about decimated our ground troops when humans first did a drop-and-grab of this planet.

"Nothing... Nothing..." Peanut was running the tapper along the far wall, tilting it to get a glimpse down into the sinkhole this den had at the far side. Our xenologists still couldn't explain why some pede dens seemed to follow a simple two-dimensional floor structure while others had these dips and sudden overhead spaces. Or why they bothered with any sort of den spaces at all when they seemed to spend most of their time chomping tunnels like extraterrestrial earthworms. Then again, the two xenologists assigned to this tiny planet weren't exactly the pick of

the Earth Hold. They were mostly new draftees like me, called to service in these bewildering years of conquest.

"Wait... Wait... Tunnels. I got tunnels." Peanut was clearing his throat hard, I saw nervously. The tapper was shaking a bit in his hand and I saw him wipe sweat from the little strip of forehead between his goggles and helmet before I spun around again to make sure our backs were clear.

"Whoah, doggie," he coughed and there was a wobble in his voice when he said, "At least one pede in deep."

Which is when it finally sank in that even Peanut knew he was too old for this shit. Even with his muscle augmentations, the man was pushing seventy. If we hit a full nest fight on this extraction, he was going to be strictly a liability. I was glad I couldn't see his eyes.

"It's coming up. Coming... Coming..."

Peanut belted the tapper now and backed away from the wall, aiming his blaster at a place just down the sinkhole. He could have just tossed down a zip bomb from his belt, I thought wildly. Just blow the wall and pedes. Not the procedure they'd taught us in training, but this was real. Why take—

I was too slow to get out of his way and he whipped an elbow back at me. "Move it, kid. Right wall. Aim at the beak on attack. If it's the rogue, just freaking spray. You ready?"

I grunted again, but couldn't make a real sound. My mouth was too dusty. Heart thudding too hard

in my ears. Helmet chin strap holding my jaw tight. Peanut looked cool again, I saw with a quick glance. The earlier signs of age were gone, the jaw hard and set. And we'd run a hundred sims of confrontations like this. I'd just never had to actually do one until today.

A scraping rumble began ahead of us now, like a dozer clearing earth, moving rocks. Only this was just a big mouth, I knew, crunching its way through solid rock to get to us. Then the dust started shaking off the wall and my own legs shook with it. I clenched my teeth hard and grounded myself on both feet, leveling my gun where I thought the eyeless beak was going to break through.

With a sudden spurt of dust, it burst out, shimmying up the short sinkhole slope like a juiced giant worm, raising its front section up in a crazy dance that clattered off pebbles and dust as it twisted its head to "see" us from side-mounted smellers.

Only...it wasn't that big. In fact it was a baby, barely as long as I was tall. And near as our xenologists had been able to figure, the pedes' interest in or ability to process raw meat didn't develop until they reached the size of a small car, at the age of thirty or so.

"Damn teenagers," muttered Peanut, lowering his gun and hawking out a dusty black globule by the left den wall. The pede seemed to get the hint because it turned and tore noisily into the wall to its right, burrowing into it like a drill into gritty butter.

I cleared my own throat and spat.

"We'd better keep on, hunh?" I said. "HQ said they wanted the rogue cleared by noon."

"Yeah, right," Peanut replied and we retreated back into the gloom of the main tunnel, stomping along and kicking open doors with a new sense of savagery, both of us.

Kick, enter, scout, tap if empty. If not, blast into shreds any pedes stupid enough to charge us. By two levels down, my body was surging with hormonal rage, my finger twitching on the gun trigger at each door, eager for an angry pede on the other side, more crazed than I'd ever been in sim. Because in Keeper sim you never got that full sour milk in the nose or grit in the teeth. You never felt the claustrophobia of panting deep into a colony of your charges, of there just being the two of you to enforce the law of the Earth Hold in the middle of this nightmare. God, the power. I didn't know why the Earth Hold a decade back suddenly reared up twelve billion strong and decided it had to go out and subjugate the universe, but we were its arms, its hammer. We were the strength of that decision.

Conquest.

"Hold up, kid," rasped Peanut behind me, breathing hard and shaking sweat off his forehead, the drops glittering in my goggle vision.

I carefully lifted my goggles to wipe the sweat from around my own eyes and nodded. We were down about eight levels now, in a widening about a hundred and twenty feet underground. It was a big colony and I figured we'd now gone about as deep as any Keepers

on this planet ever had. Anything resembling doors had vanished back up on level three somewhere. There were just big black holes for entry up down and sideways now so that we'd had to use our climbers a few times. Also, the concept of main tunnels was getting loose. Made me wonder if maybe the whole door/corridor thing was a construct for us, not them.

But the bloody colony was still hot as blazes, like they were powering it somehow, or there was a huge nest below us somewhere, big enough that the combined heat of the throbbing, pulsing larvae was seeping right up through the rock.

"You okay, old man?" I asked.

"Yeah, fine." He coughed. "Never better." He waved his gun ahead of us into what looked like a multiple branching in every direction. So much for main tunnels or levels. "Nest down there. You hear it?"

I calmed my breathing and concentrated. Yes. A kind of squishy rumbling sound. Not like the pedes going through rocks. More like them sliding over one another. Nest. *Nest*. God, they didn't even have a real one of those on *picto*. Just constructs in *sim* based on Keeper horror stories. Just...

Like a sudden sludge of ice water had been poured through me, the earlier rage hormones vanished and I felt a shiver of intense attachment to my gun, readjusted my clammy fingers nervously. "What do we do?" I whispered.

"Go there."

"Shit, why?"

"It's where the rogue will be."

Peanut turned to me, consciously raising his helmet so I could see his weathered face better. "Look, kid. You remember what I said about mid-life bug-outs making the nests pop with them?"

I nodded. "But we're only guessing it's a mid-life thing, right?" I whispered to draw this out. "We didn't pin the exact age."

"It's a mid-life, kid. Been dealing with these things five years now. I know when they get it. When they feel where they're at and realize they ain't never going back again. And death's coming up way too fast. They're scared. They freak."

"The bug-out."

"Yuh."

"You did that?"

Peanut looked down and scraped some pede slime from his boot off onto the side wall. "Eight years ago I went crazy, got augmented to the hilt, finally killed the stupid— Whatever. Killed my career. Ended up here." He raised his goggled eyes to look at me and, in the artificial colors of the IR set, resembled a half-wrapped corpse.

I cleared my throat. "Why the nest?"

Peanut snorted and turned away. "He's fighting his fear by being the big man again. Just like me. Just like the Earth Hold. Scared we're not moving forward anymore so let's do something about it. Stupid. Hormone driven. But here we are."

I barely heard him. My hand was swiping back and forth at the sweat on my forehead, playing with my chin strap. "You knew we were going down to a nest, just two of us," I muttered. "In a *sim*, the survival

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rate's...what? One in ten? With backup? And we're going down because of one stupid pede."

"No choice, kid. We're the Keepers."

I shook my head angrily. "No choice? There's always a choice. You could have told them topside. We could have taken down a troop. We—"

"Hey!" He slapped my shoulder hard with the butt of his gun and I almost dropped it. I snapped my eyes to him and his half-wrapped face was grinning at me. "We'll do fine, kid. Who do you think helped design the sims? I been here before."

I blinked. "Here? These tunnels?"

He shook his head, already moving on down the tunnel branch ahead. "Not these ones. But I was in the Year One mess. I was the only survivor when those two Keeper stations got wiped."

He reached the branch, stopped, listened, chose a tunnel sloping sharply up into the side wall, strapped climbers onto his knees and elbows, and went up, gun pointed ahead. I stood stubbornly for a minute, watched his form fade, waited for the sound of a pede rushing in on him, then I swore, slapped on my climbers and leapt up after him.

At the next juncture, I listened hard for Peanut, then took off my climbers and threw myself into a tunnel sized more like a sewer pipe. I was forced onto my belly and elbows, wriggling along like a closed-in pede myself. The heat was choking now, the sound an almost

physical sense of squishing and sucking squeezing over me. Trapped. Suffocating. Wriggle. I wasn't going to make it. Going to get stuck. Die here.

But then I managed to crane my neck far enough up to see Peanut's boots jerking back and forth ahead in my goggle sight. "Rogue couldn't have gone in this way," I squeaked up to him as I wriggled faster to catch up. "Wouldn't fit. Had to be a teenager. We gotta go back."

The feet ahead stopped moving for a second. "Nest this way," Peanut's voice came back. He sounded almost done in. Moving again. "Must be...multiple access in, out. Rogue came different way. He'll be there."

"You keep calling it 'he.'"

"Mid-life. Told you, kid. Unh!" The feet ahead stopped again. Must have banged himself. "Only men are stupid enough." Moving. Squinching around a corner.

"Yeah, and you—"

"Holy...freaking..."

"You stopped again!"

"...shit."

He kicked his feet up and down as he surged forward ahead of me, pulling himself out, I realized, from our tube. I followed in a fury, sucking myself joyously out of that hole like a cork out of a bottle, stopped from falling only by Peanut's hand. I teetered, staring, and wished I could wriggle back into the hole.

We'd found the nest.

Positively blazing in the IR spectrum, the nightmare was bigger than any of the supposed eye-witness stories I'd heard. It scooped maybe fifty heat-wavering meters

across, the size of a small stadium, and half as deep, like a cooking bowl burrowed out of the rock's insides. Or a womb.

The domed ceiling we were halfway up was pocked all over with small holes like the one we'd just come out of. Too small for adult millipedes. So the adult pedes must have laid their eggs here, then sealed it up. And sent back teens with food? Or maybe no pedes came back. Maybe every one of those thousand-plus holes in the dome were made by the early larvae who'd grown enough to chomp themselves up and out already. Many, many more to follow.

I looked down again and almost swayed off the ledge. I'd seen this when I'd come out of the hole and my brain had shut it out. But now the smell and heat and slithering, squishing noises rose up around me full force and I turned from Peanut to retch shakily against the nest wall. The entire womb floor, thick enough you couldn't see the bottom, was a solid squirming mass of milky pede larvae. They crawled over each other, under, and through. Freaking things seemed to be eating each other as casually as humans said hello. So much for the no-meat-until-maturity theory.

Oh, God. I wiped the sourness from around my mouth, straightened my goggles, and tried to take stock like a Keeper should. Peanut beat me to it.

"Down there, kid," he croaked and pointed.

Over to his right, further down the wall we'd entered through, the squirming pede ocean had taken on

a wave. It was running about ten yards out from the wall. A bent-over hill of pedes, mostly dead but live ones squirming under and over the corpses, rising up and swaying as tall as our main Keeper lodge, taller, and shaking like it could collapse over at any moment. And on top, like a grotesque King Kong, reared up what had to be the rogue. He was huge, easily two stories himself, swinging back and forth, then ducking down at the larvae around him, crunching their half-formed carapaces and whipping them around somewhere on his growing wave of might.

"This is hell, right?" I whispered.

"You got it," responded Peanut as he carefully pulled his climbers from his belt and strapped them on. "And it's our job to kill the Devil."

"Oh, come on..." I moaned, but Peanut was already off our ledge and using the climbers to scale down the wall, his gun pointed down at the madness below.

"We leave him and the pedes will know!" Peanut shouted back up to me as I scrambled to strap on my climbers. "They'll all go crazy! Probably on their way to get him themselves! To beat us to it! We gotta be quick!"

"What—" I almost slipped clamping my first climber into the wall and swore. "What about the defender pedes? In the sims..."

"You see any? Forget the sims!" Peanut was within range now and the rogue seemed to have become aware of him, twisting its body so the claw-like legs wove in Peanut's direction. "Just keep away from the little munchers! Use your gun with

mine! We drop the rogue and... Holy shit."

The wall beside Peanut was shaking, rumbling, and suddenly a pede's beak the size of a freighter cone was bursting out, crumbling my partner's climber holds even as he went scrambling backwards. I raised my gun and fired a half dozen times. The new pede adult went tumbling, half-shredded, into the ocean of larvae, who swarmed over him until he disappeared.

But more adults were bursting through all over, tearing into the pede larvae like great killer whales, surrounding the rogue on his wave. I fired and wiped at my goggles, struggling to keep a three-climber hold as I spun and blasted, spun again. Where was Peanut? Where—?

I saw him. He'd fallen right to the edge of the larvae ocean, holding on with one climber and firing wildly, as the baby pedes rolled up in a second wave toward him. I yelled and blasted at the swell, only to have it crumple forward and surge up again. Then, as I watched, two larvae on the crest reached Peanut at once, ripping through his gun and body like he almost wasn't there, crashing in bits of bloody flesh and bone against the nest wall. Gone.

And in that insanity, some survival reflex kicked in. Clutching my gun like a primitive club, I hurried across the wall like a scuttling crab, straight for the hole the first adult pede had broken through to send Peanut tumbling. Almost lost it at the edge because the monster had come through sloppily and my climbers couldn't grab the loose

gravel. But I managed to throw one climber-strapped elbow far enough into the hole to grab its floor, and I pulled up.

Turned back to the nest.

The heat thudded against my face, pounding at it with the death and frenzy of the larvae maelstrom that churned just below the lip of my hole. And the rogue, incredibly, was still alive ten meters out there, chewed but snapping about in a frenzy, blood spraying and tiny claws waving about like mini-buzz saws. "Eat this," I said quietly, taking aim. I squeezed three quick shots and tore his head clean off.

Then I turned and ran.

Back through the adult pede tunnel, sloping up, thank God. I checked myself as I ran. Head was buzzing, felt exploded, legs and arms were gashed and bleeding. My tongue felt like a furry stick in my mouth. Had to get up and out of here. The sound of pedes keen-ing and rumbling was growing behind me.

At the first juncture, I whipped out my tapper and tried to do a reach for the surface. Too far. But at least it oriented my up and down and I ducked into the upmost tunnel, climbing as recklessly as I dared. Halfway up, terrified I heard a mouth crunching up under me in the dark, I let spill a series of zip bombs behind me, heard them clatter, and felt my feet fry through my boots as they went off somewhere below.

On and on. Climbing. Juncture. Choose. Run. Juncture. Again. Shit lost but climbing, dropping zip bombs behind me in fear, blasting

anything that moved. Up. Go. Didn't want to die.

Then, just when I was sure I was lost a few miles from where the exits to the surface were, something about a tunnel hit a chord and I stumbled into a den with an already blasted pede. One of Peanut's and my entrance kills. God, I was going to make it.

And with that thought, I almost collapsed and began crying. But I knew I still had a hundred feet or so of vertical to go and pushed myself on, allowing a ragged sob or two to slip out.

It was so wrong, I thought, scraping against the walls as I ran. Calling it a mid-life crisis. Because what Peanut had done, what the rogue had done, what the goddamn Earth Hold had done—lashing out like a great freaking shit—that was *end* of life.

I stopped at a familiar juncture, took five deep, rasping breaths, and pressed my climbers painfully into the wall, began to climb.

I was up to the corridors and doors again. Looked around.

Then I sucked in the lighter air

and started laughing with little barking sounds until I choked. Because I understood suddenly that the pedes had left us corridors and doors to make us feel safe. Make us feel like we were on top of things while they built their numbers below. Now there had to be more down there by a factor of thousands than our xenologists had calculated. All just waiting to wipe us off the face of this planet. Like every species was getting set to wipe us out of everywhere.

I ran down the first entrance corridor, passed the first den, found the entrance hole and climbed up into the dull light of the planet's noon. There I fell down onto my knees in the dust and gripped my arms around myself, clutching and retching again. Shivering.

Mission: success.

One over-the-hill casualty, but the situation...maintained.

I struggled up to my feet and began limping back to base. Return the conquering hero, keeper of the peace, *Keeper* of the Earth Hold.

Welcome me back, boys.

All's well. ♣

In upcoming issues...

In upcoming issues of *On Spec*, look for new work by CORY DOCTOROW, JAMES VAN PELT, DAVID CLINK, THOMAS CLABURN, KATE RIEDEL, CATHERINE MACLEOD, MICI GOLD, JOY HEWITT MANN, LAURIE CHANNER & PETER WATTS, E.L. CHEN, MELINDA HSU, MICHAEL VANCE, D. PETER MACLEOD, Hugh A.D. SPENCER, STEVE MOHN, DERRYL MURPHY, SCOTT MACKAY, and many more!

Dance of the Dead

John Craig

Staccato laughter shredded the chill desert night, complementing desperate pleas, rasping zippers, some culinary artistry.

SHE LASTED AWHILE. ONE CAME IN HIS PANTS, WATCHING.

Later, a couple of shovels chunked into the sand. A hole, six feet long, two wide and about three deep, slowly filled.

A slender arm was stiffly exposed. The hand, as though beseeching, reached for the sweet, open air. One finger seemed to point to the deep indigo sky.

It took a while, but the hot, dry dirt eventually swallowed the arm, then the hand, finally the finger.

JOE HORN WALKED A BLACK DESERT ROAD, DEAD STRAIGHT TO FOREVER.

Cholla and cactus were lonely sentinels, casting long, cold shadows in the morning light. His breath fogged the air.

He wore a tattered field jacket and hadn't shaved in a while. Headed nowhere, like fingers on an Ouija board. Ignoring the annoying little voice in the back of his mind.

...harry...

Shuddup.

Yesterday he passed through a wide spot in the road. Stopped at the Gas-Mart, purchased supplies: Dinty Moore and Diet Coke. Could have gone into the lone bar, got a beer, belched with impunity. But no. Muck Drippy Thing, or one of his goopy friends, was back there somewhere.

No home. No family. Just flophouses, abandoned barns, highway underpasses, open fields, and the empty road. Thanks to good old Muck Drippy Thing. Where you gonna set, boy, when someday you *know* he's gonna come knockin'?

As the leaden heat of the day descended, he ate body temperature stew

in the shade of a boulder that had been undercut by a million years of steady winds. The plastic spoon scraped a hollow sound from the can. As he munched, came an unbidden thought:

...harry lived somewhere around here...

Get lost. I'm busy cryin' the blues.

He waited out the searing day, being good at that, and would have slept, if he still could. He successfully ignored the little voice.

Then, at dusk, he heard the faint crackle of grit underfoot.

Just like that, he was back in 'Nam, face down in the mud. He drew his Kabar, listening, sniffing the air for that smell of sweat and fear and blood and bamboo.

...harry crouched beside him...

Shuddup, I'm busy.

Slowly, he rose, turning. Saw the boots. Indian style, soft and fringed. Nothing else. The flies and the mud and the far-off sound of choppers faded.

Empty boots. Real fine.

...harry was an indian...

He kicked the voice out of his head, then sat and watched the sun go down on rocky peaks, flooding the land with ink.

He was old and tired and a little whacked, a twisted refugee from the mental lapse called 'Nam. They rounded up the derelicts and the innocents and the plain stupid and hammered them into replicant GI Joes. Mailed them to Saigon, COD: Cracked On Delivery. Dumped them into the churning pit and waited to see what it spit back out.

Joe Horn, Happy Vet.

He stared at the boots.

Naturally, they fit. Like he had time for this.

He started walking. The boots turned south. The little voice was humming.

I'll get you for this, Horn thought.

The moon rose, nearly full. Its pale glow made a sere scape, bare shapes casting stark shadows. The air was chilled, but he sweated.

IN HIGH SCHOOL, THE BAD GUYS used him for a punching bag, beat the shit out of him just for fun. Because he was a little shit. Because he was Joey Monkey Baby. Because he was there.

Escaped to college. Went to 'Nam.

In 'Nam, Horn learned about death. Not the usual death, not the mundane, ordinary, everyday death of bullets, bombs and stupidity. Not the death that took fifty eight thousand Americans, three and a half million Vietnamese.

Horn learned about the real death. The death that keeps on giving.

He turned in Sergeant Hawkins for dealing. So one night The Hawk and his friends grabbed Horn and tied him to a tree and worked him over until Horn was coughing blood.

The Hawk drew his Kabar, muttering half to himself, "You fucked me, boy. I had a nice network goin' and you *fucked* me."

Horn spat back, "You're a goddamn dealer, asshole."

Yea, verily, the slash and parry of intellectual debate.

And Horn was thinking, So this is what it means.

The Hawk used the knife to carve a ragged Z in Horn's chest, and Horn screamed, and it all came out. "Nothing changed, you god-damned creeps! Nothing changed!"

The Hawk laughed, and the others smiled. Because it was true, and they thought it amusing that Horn had figured it out that way.

But then, by God, something did change.

A tall, bloated, Muck Drippy Thing rose from the black water, and it ate every damned one of them, sucked on their naked terror like The Hawk sucked on weed, stick-arms scooping them into the huge, rubber mouth like handfuls of popcorn.

Horn got away, stumbled through the jungle, gasping, wetting his pants. Hearing the fading screams.

Always, he would hear them.

Pretending he didn't know where it came from, or why. But fearing, suspecting, that somehow he had done it.

ONE THING: HE NEVER SLEPT again. Ever. Because somebody quiet and slimy was always back there, following. Or up ahead, waiting.

Hey, Joe, you snooze, you lose.

AFTER 'NAM, HE MET A LITTLE Japanese guy named Sato. Sato could throw him across a room, and did. Many, many times. Beat most of the horror out of him. Useful instruction. Sometimes Muck Drippy Thing dropped in for a bite.

Something moved, brought him

back to the ugly present. The late Sergeant Wilfred Hawkins' Kabar fighting knife jumped into Horn's hand.

Not Muck Drippy Thing this time, or even one of his friends. Instead, he saw a woman. Young and slim. Long, wild hair, flying in a nonexistent wind. Somber, flat-planed face. Beautiful eyes brimming with pain. Saw a cholla bush right through her, as she reached for him.

Her hand went through his heart.

Horn felt pain. Living dying heartbreak failure despair shame pride love.

A great deal of love.

A lonely, lonely pain. He already knew that part, too well, thank you.

And then he knew her.

A FOUR-BY SAT SILENT, GRAY IN the moonlight, lonely tracks arcing into the night. Two men heaved dirt in a deep hole under small, bright lamps:

Stanley Barber, tall, rangy, sweat rolling down his long face, making muddy tracks, staining his clothes. He had hooded eyes.

Jacob Lightfeather. Short and slender, long black hair bound back, quiet face tight and closed.

They worked in silence, the diggers, stooping and grunting and gouging the dry soil with their flat-bladed shovels. Dumping cool dirt into the waiting bucket.

Ancient stairs lay exposed, marching to the top. And there, working the tripod and the bucket, looking down:

Wilson Pettibone, Doctor of Archaeology. Middle-aged and rumped,

gray fringe around his bald dome. Absently touched his small salt and pepper mustache. Watery blue eyes watched the two below him.

They broke through at four in the morning.

PETTIBONE SCRAMBLED DOWN THE stairs, squeezed by with a lamp. Dust and stale air rolled out. Stanley and the Indian stood back.

The light showed a circular room with a low, domed ceiling. Five masks on the wall, age-blackened, brooding, corrupt. Bones littered the floor. Gold winked from the shadows.

Pettibone caught his breath. This was it. This was really it. He mouthed the words: The Tomb of Names.

A hoary legend among the small circle of people who knew of such things. Wilson Pettibone's specialty, tracking down hoary legends. He usually did the grunt work, so people like that jerk Massingale could fly around the world and dig up things and get their names splashed all over the journals.

But this time Massingale had done it all without him. Found the place on his own. Wanted to gloat, like always. Said he remembered Pettibone had once researched it and wanted him to be the first to know.

Thoughtful of him.

Fifteen years ago, when Pettibone was chasing that wicked looking English professor, Susan something, Massingale had cut him out and married her. Wanted Pettibone to be the first to know about that, too. Said, "She still has the utmost

respect for you, old man." Shrugged and smiled, as clear as saying out loud that he never expected Pettibone to believe it and couldn't care less if he did.

Susan died right after the honeymoon. Too bad, but everyone dies.

Massingale died, too. Last Thursday night, in his study. An oak-paneled shrine to his glory, dripping with leather-bound first editions and souvenirs from his digs. Flopping like a fish at the end of Stanley's garrote.

Pettibone watched, sitting in one of Massingale's obscenely expensive leather arm chairs. Saying, "It was me, 'old man.' I eviscerated her. Nice tits, though. I left them intact, you'll remember."

A particular fetish of Pettibone's, to watch.

JACOB WATCHED THEIR HUNGER suck them into the tomb. He set down his shovel and followed.

JACOB'S GRANDFATHER HAD BEEN a steel worker, building skyscrapers in big cities. He taught Jacob about his tribe, his family. Things Jacob's father would have taught him if he hadn't died in a rice paddy in Vietnam.

Taught Jacob about the Gift.

Grandfather called it the Snake. Said, the Snake don't care, grandson. Don't love, don't hate. Just eats and sleeps. You want somethin', you got to wake it up and feed it. You got to be careful, though. No tellin' how hungry it's gonna be.

Jacob remembered bright summer days, his little sister Elena chasing him through the house, squealing.

Mother died. Leukemia.

He fought with Elena all through their childhood.

Watched her become a woman. Started seeing her more that way, less as his sister.

Sometimes he masturbated, thinking about her. Wanting her. Not realizing what it meant.

Worked hard, got an engineering scholarship. Gonna make Grandfather retire, stop walking the beams way up there. Grandfather was proud enough to burst.

Sophomore year, Grandfather fell thirty-three floors.

Jacob realized, then, what it meant to feed the Snake.

After the funeral, Jacob stripped off his clothes and lay on his bed in the still summer night, watching the fat, gibbous moon. He wondered, if you fell from there, how many stories it was.

Waited for Elena. Knowing she would come. Yeah. Because he had fed the Snake.

The door creaked. Moon shadows molded Elena's nude body.

The quiet lay between them like a vast desert. She crossed it with a step and lay with him. Wrapped her legs around him. Clawed his back, screaming, partly from pain.

Lying with her, feeling her sweat-slick skin, he thought he ought to feel shame, but he just didn't care.

Their fire cauterized the pain. Elena laughed more, and cried less for what they had lost. Not knowing.

Jacob knew, but in spite of knowing, he found something akin to harmony, like the way he'd heard a man felt when he had a vision, when the parts of his life came together

and he understood who he was.

But he knew he didn't really understand.

He understood the Snake, though.

He took care of the feathered cape and the masks and the other things Grandfather had given him. But he never practiced what Grandfather had taught him, the rituals, the dances. He did not have it in him to make good medicine.

Because he was busy feeding the Snake.

He knew Elena would come when he Called. Always. He needed her that way. Loved her more than love could know.

And one night, after he had Called her, she said, "I know what you did to me, and it doesn't matter. I love you anyway."

She could have driven a stake through his heart with less effect.

He stopped Calling her.

Days passed. They barely spoke.

Finally, she cornered him. "Please. Do...what you do." Closing her eyes. "I...like the way it makes me feel."

"I killed Grandfather," he blurted, hoping she would hate him and leave, praying she wouldn't. "I fed him to the Snake—" Thinking, how could she understand? Or forgive?

"No," she said quietly. "You fell. Like he did. It happens."

"How can you know—"

"He told me, in a dream. You didn't know. Now you know. I miss you, Jacob. Call me. Please."

He Called her that night. She seemed to enjoy it more than usual.

ONE NIGHT HE CALLED AND SHE DID not come, and he got a bad feeling.

He went down into the cool damp smell of the basement. Lit the candles, drew the signs.

Shed some of his blood, feeding the Snake, but only a little, because he wanted only a little thing.

Talked to the shadows.

Sat there, numbed and silent, as he learned how she had died.

Shed more blood, and got names.

Blew out the candles and went back upstairs and sat out on the porch under the yellow moon, until dawn stained the sky.

Found them in a bar, these two, looking for a couple of dumb redskins to dig a big fucking hole in the desert.

And now he was here. And this time he was really going to feed the Snake.

JACOB WATCHED THEM WALLOWING in their stupid greed. He knew all about greed. Greed made you want things you couldn't pay for. But you paid anyway. He would pay. They would pay.

"Hey, boy!" snapped Stanley. "We hired you to work, not stand around like a damned tourist!" He reached for one of the masks, not looking at Jacob. "Gimme a hand here!"

"Careful, Stanley," murmured Pettibone, carefully stroking another of the masks. "This is priceless art."

Jacob thought Pettibone's eyes were gleaming.

Stanley snorted, without taking his eyes from the mask. "I don't know nothin' about art, Mister Pettibone, but I know this ain't art. It's just damn ugly."

When he spoke, Jacob found that his voice was surprisingly soft. "Elena was my sister."

Stanley turned his head and blinked. Pettibone looked up.

Jacob's face was as dead as the mask in Stanley's hand. "You saw her at a gas station. Followed her and ran her car off the road. Took her into the desert and raped her. Then you killed her."

Stanley was momentarily dumbstruck.

Pettibone's mustache twitched nervously, accentuating the dead stillness.

Jacob held up a silver and turquoise ring. "I gave this to Elena on her sixteenth birthday. I found it in the truck." Thanks to his gift.

One thing Grandfather had told him: Truth don't care.

Stanley tried to laugh, but the sound curdled and died. The tableau was frozen for a heartbeat, an instant of total truth, as clear as a cloudless day.

"Christ, Stanley, you had to keep the ring," said Pettibone in a tired voice. Then he sighed, and shrugged, "We were going to kill him anyway."

A switchblade appeared in Stanley's hand, *snick*.

Jacob knew his death would be hard. This Calling required a lot of blood. Grandfather told him, you pay for what you get.

But he would be with Elena again. And Grandfather, Mother, Father. My, the list is getting long. And his gift could go take a flying leap.

And then a man stepped into the light.

Stanley whirled.

Pettibone's hand whipped up, holding something small and gleaming. The man's foot lashed out, *crack*, and a gun flew across the room. Pettibone reeled back.

Stanley went for the stranger with the blinding speed of a snake. Steel flashed, and then Stanley was sitting on the floor, watching his guts gurgle into his lap.

Jacob was confused. The man looked like a derelict. But Jacob saw his boots. He knew those boots, and his spine tingled. "Who are you?"

"Joe Horn," the man said absently. A bloody and efficient-looking knife hung limply from one hand. "Friend of Harry's—" He stopped and stood still, listening. His eyes looked far away, and saw something horrible.

He knows, thought Jacob.

"We'd better go," said Horn. "Now." His voice was icy calm.

Jacob looked around. At Pettibone, white-faced, slumped against the wall, cradling his shattered wrist. At Stanley Barber, sitting in his own guts, his mouth hanging slack with mortal surprise. At Joe Horn, carefully cleaning his blade on Stanley's shirt. At the twisted masks on the wall that now seemed to be grinning.

Then he followed Horn into the darkness.

PETTIBONE LOOKED AT THE GOLD, all the gold. He stumbled toward it, whimpering. Then he saw movement from the corner of his eye.

Stanley's body spasmed, and blood spurted from between his fingers, dribbled into his lap. His wide,

dying eyes turned to Pettibone. His mouth opened, as if to speak. Then he slowly collapsed, like a leaky balloon, and the only sound he made was a faint sigh.

The body shuddered, and seemed to bloat with sudden gas. Then it lurched and flopped. The throat worked spasmodically.

Something emerged from Stanley's mouth, elongating and expanding. It glistened and rippled and dripped blood. It had hideous eyes.

JACOB LIGHTFEATHER WAS THE Guardian of the Tomb of Names. The power to Know, and to Call, and the Duty to Guard, had passed to him through his Grandfather.

He did a minor Calling, and the desert shifted and swirled, stirred by unseen hands. Sand and rocks poured into the pit, silencing Pettibone's screams.

Feeding the Snake.

'NAM, '74:

Corporal Harry Lightfeather knocked Lieutenant Joe Horn face-down in a rice paddy and took six AK-47 rounds in the chest.

They got separated from the platoon. Horn ended up staggering seven miles with Harry on his back. Blood soaked his fatigues.

"Stay awake, Harry," he pleaded. "Talk to me."

Harry murmured about having a vision. Big thing for an Indian. Something about his kids. "Gonna need you someday, Horn," he croaked. "You gotta be there, okay? Okay?" Spitting blood all over Horn's nice uniform.

"Sure, Harry," Horn grunted. "I promise. Just keep talking."

But somewhere along the way, Harry stopped talking.

THE FOUR-BY STOPPED.

Horn cut the engine, and the desert was still. "This is where they buried her," he said.

They got out.

Horn stood there, thinking, Sorry, Harry, too little, too late. Story of my life.

He remembered Elena's pain. A piece of it was lodged in his gut, like shrapnel. But there was nothing else here now. She was gone.

Harry's little girl. Gone.

He knelt in the sand, and cried.

JACOB WORE GRANDFATHER'S boots now. He looked at Horn, his father's friend, whose heart was big enough to fight for a man he'd never met, to cry for a woman he never would. In that lean, lost face, he saw himself. And his purpose.

He didn't have the mask or the feathered cape, but he did it anyway. One of the things Grandfather had taught him.

The Dance of the Dead. To ease a tortured soul. ♣

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The University of Alberta Library is soliciting donations to its recently established Science Fiction Deposit Research Collection to create a still larger, publicly accessible, research collection of regional and national significance, similar to that of Toronto's Merril Collection of Science Fiction, Speculation and Fantasy.

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No Such Thing as an Ex-Con

Holly Phillips

WAS IT IRONY THAT WHEN KEV TOLD HER THE company had won the bid for the new courthouse park, the only thing Emily felt was relief? Relief that Mr. Berl couldn't use the excuse of a slow spring to fire her. She knew damn well he'd only hired her, an ex-con, because she was Kev's friend.

(*No such thing as an **ex-con***, Bernice had told her the morning of the parole hearing.)

Even when she was there, planting with the rest of the crew, Emily didn't give it much thought. The new courthouse was nothing like the old one, it sparked no memories. She dug holes and tried to remember what had been on that corner before. As a bike courier she'd known every building in every block this side of the river. Still hard not to miss the riding, but at least she was fit again. No hope of getting her old job back, of course, a felon isn't bondable.

Felon. Convict. Accessory to murder.

Stomp the spade deep, heave out the heavy load of black wet dirt. The hole had to be big, they were putting in four-year-old elms here, American elms that could resist the blight.

"Emily Lake." The man's voice asserted rather than questioned.

Emily looked up. "Detective Bailor." She took off her gloves and cap, raked her short hair into spikes and jammed the cap back on.

"I heard you were out," he said. "What was it, three years?"

"And a half." With a kind of delayed shock, the hatred she'd once learned for that raspy smoker's voice welled up and burst in her chest like a bubble

of mud.

He nodded once, looked her over. Looked over the worksite. Nodded again and left, crossing the plaza to climb the stairs to the courthouse doors. The rain started up again, dripping off the bill of her cap. She pulled on her wet gloves and went back to her shovel.

"So who was that?" Kev asked when they quit for lunch.

"Some guy," Emily said, shoulders hunched, face like stone.

No such thing as an ex-con.

UGLY, RUNNING INTO BAILOR LIKE that, but she couldn't blame him for the nightmares. Those were already waiting, same as they always were, filling her boardinghouse room like the fat stench of decay. Memory. What god laughed when he came up with that one?

The women, of course, mute ghosts haunting her in memory as they'd haunted her in fact. And the dreams of murder, the ache of terror when she'd been sure she was going nuts, the unbearable relief of the letter to the cops, that had not, in the end, been any kind of relief at all. All of that in Emily's mind as she showered off the mud and sweat, ate a sandwich, crawled into bed. She only knew she cried in her dreams by the pain in her throat in the morning, every morning.

BAILOR CAME AGAIN, OF COURSE. She was checking the inventory of the plants just delivered by the nursery. Another rainy day, the sheets of paper on the clipboard were soaked and flimsy, hard to read. She was trying to decide if that was

10 junipers or 18 when that familiar rasp said, "They working you hard?"

It had to be a 10, because otherwise they were short by nine plants. "Yeah." Her pencil made a hole in the paper.

"Had any more dreams?"

God, she thought wearily, what a shit. But when she looked up, she saw no mockery in his small blue eyes. He looked uneasy behind that cop's mustache. All the same she said, "Screw you, Bailor."

He snorted. "You used to have better manners."

"Yeah, well, prison's funny that way." She dropped her eyes to the clipboard, made a careful note.

"Actually," Bailor said, and stopped.

Rain pattered on the plaza bricks, on the inventory list, on the bill of her cap. She looked up.

Bailor stood, raincoat bunched up so he could shove his hands in his pockets, watching dirt spill from a tear in a root ball's burlap cover. "Actually," he said again. Then, "Aw, to hell with it." He turned and stomped away, growling over his shoulder, "See you around, Lake."

AT NIGHT, THE DREAMS.

Bailor's smoker's voice. "Look at this." A woman's face, teeth bared above the ruin of her throat. "Look at this." The smell of stale smoke on his breath. The slashes across her breast. "Look." Photographs of death. "Look." Mementos of torture. "Look at this. Look at it, damn you!"

"I've already seen it!"

"Where?"

"Right there!" Pointing to the empty corner at his back. Empty in his eyes. Not in hers.

"Don't give me that shit." Small blue eyes in the red slab of his face. "Don't you dare give me that shit."

"But it's true. I can't help it. You think I wouldn't rather be crazy? You think I wouldn't rather do anything than live with this? With... *them*?"

But dream-Bailor is gone and only the women are left. Amanda. Glennis. Cherie. Pam. They wear the wounds of their murders scrawled across the bodies no one but Emily can see. Pam stares with empty eye sockets, Glennis holds her own guts in her hands, Amanda's bloated and soft from the nights in the river. The nights she'd waited until Emily had written the letter to the cops telling them where to find her. Amanda, Glennis, Cherie, Pam, in death and rage, crowding close. Until she wakes.

WHEN SHE SHOWED UP AT THE worksite, Kev took one look and said, "You look like shit. Nobody'll fire you if you take a day off."

To do what, watch the empty corners of her rented room? "I'm fine." The nursery's delivery truck was already there, *beep beeping* as it backed over the curb. Emily tossed her lunch bag into Kev's truck and headed over.

"Hey," he said.

"I'm fine," she told him, face hard as concrete.

No such thing as an ex-con. It was there in his face. "Sor-ry," he said. They unloaded the plants in silence.

The sun came out that afternoon

and the work drew a small crowd of onlookers, people on their way to or from the courthouse. Every gray raincoat that stopped pulled Emily's head around, all afternoon, until a scowl was fixed on her face. But Bailor didn't show until quitting time.

"You need a lift home?" Kev asked her.

"No thanks." She crumpled up her lunch bag, her eyes evading his. "I'll take the bus."

"Suit yourself." He jerked open the driver's side door of his truck, then said, "If you're in some kind of trouble, I hope you know you can ask me for help."

"Yeah." She stuffed the lunch bag in her jacket pocket. "Thanks."

"I put myself out on a limb getting you this job."

"I know."

Kev shrugged, climbed into his truck. "See you Monday." He slammed the door, started the engine. Drove off, leaving muddy tire tracks across the plaza.

Emily turned and waited for Bailor to approach. He looked as tired as always, permanent stains around his eyes. He was still walking when she said, "What the hell do you want with me?"

"You need a ride?"

Her stomach churned, scalding her throat. "Yeah."

He turned, jerked his head for her to follow.

He drove a Ford sedan, newish but already dented in the driver's door. There were paper cups stained with old coffee on the passenger side. Emily stomped them flat with her boots. Bailor started up

the car and backed out of his parking spot. *Reserved for police vehicles only.*

He said, "So how's it going, now you're outside? You're on parole, right?"

"Eighteen months to go."

"That's a pretty good job you got there. You're lucky. What'd you do before, bike messenger, right? How come you didn't go back to that?"

"You need to be bonded."

"Oh yeah? I didn't know that." He stopped at the lot exit. "So where am I taking you?"

"Broadbent and Third."

"Okay." He pulled out, cutting off a tentative town car. "What I said the other day. When I asked if you'd had any dreams again. That was kind of the wrong thing to say."

"No shit."

"Thing is." His thick fingers tightened on the wheel. The first two on his right hand were stained yellow, but the car smelled mostly of old coffee and dog. There was a pale stripe across the ring finger on his left hand. He cleared his throat and swallowed. "Thing is, I didn't mean it that way. I mean," his hands so tight the bones showed at his knuckles, "I actually want to know."

Emily stared out the windscreen, squinting through the tension. "You sure the hell never did before."

"Yeah, well." He cleared his throat again. "How come you never copped a plea when we had your whole damn confession?"

"That wasn't a confession. That was...you know what that was."

"Yeah, right. Psychic bullshit. Even your dumb-ass public defender knew you were going down.

Even if," he added in a mutter, "Slobodski did say he never heard of you."

She leaned her head back against the seat. "I couldn't plead guilty to something I didn't do."

"Man," he said, still as if talking to himself. "I've never seen anything like it. The way you tore into the prosecutor, screaming about ghosts and dreams, the judge banging her gavel..."

Another nightmare, a different kind. Emily closed her eyes. "What do you want, Bailor?"

They were crossing the bridge, she could tell by the way he rode the gas and brake. Rush hour traffic. She would have been home by now if she'd ridden her bike.

"You read the newspapers?" Bailor finally said.

"No."

More silence, as if he were chewing it over. "I got a case. Child abduction. Fifteen years a detective and this is the first one I've had. Couple of boys. First one seven weeks ago, the second one just last week. Both of them eight years old, both of them kidnapped right out of their beds. Good families, no divorces, no angry grandparents. Everything says stranger abduction, and with two kids gone now..."

Emily rolled her head to look at his face and recognized the hard look there. Desperation. She'd felt it from the inside.

"What do you want from me?" she said, but it wasn't really a question anymore. She just wanted to hear him say it. Her guts like a fist clenched under her ribs.

It didn't look like it was any

easier for him, but he got it out: "I need your help."

"Again," she said. "You need my help again."

Bailor clenched his hands on the wheel, and his jaw on the words he still refused to say.

HE DROPPED HER OFF ON THE corner; she wouldn't tell him the number of the house. Not that he couldn't find out easily enough. He handed her a business card with his pager number scribbled on the back.

"Listen," he said as she climbed out of the car, "these kids... They don't have forever."

"I'll call you."

He leaned across the seat to see her face. "You know how many women Slobodski would have killed if we hadn't caught him? That's how many kids this freak could kill. You know what I'm saying?"

She propped her arms on the roof of the car. "Do you believe I never knew Slobodski, or those women, or saw any of the murders except in dreams? Do you believe in ghosts? Do you believe I told the truth?"

He straightened and put the car in gear. "What I believe," he said, "is that I will do any goddamn thing it takes to find those kids. Any goddamn thing at all."

She pushed off from the car. "Go to hell, Bailor." She slammed the door and he drove off, turned the corner without signaling, and was gone.

ACCORDING TO HIS CARD, Bailor'd made sergeant since her

trial. Detective Sergeant Willis G. Bailor.

She wondered what the G stood for.

WHEN THE COPS HAD ARRIVED AT her door, she actually cried with relief, though they'd mistaken it for fear. The ride to Headquarters had been almost a pleasure. The whole world brighter, the November sunshine rich as gold, as her relief that she was not insane. What she had dreamed was true. But then, sitting in the interview room, she had realized the dead women were still with her, naked, expressionless. Dead. And then the questions. How did she know about the body in the river? How did she know the details of the crimes? Why did she tell no one sooner? And especially, repeated so often the words blurred into sound: Who was he, who was the killer?

And all she could say was, "I dreamed their murders. I see their ghosts. I don't know who he is." While the dead women watched from their corner.

And then being locked into that narrow cell, she and the four dead women, blind Pam, disemboweled Glennis, bloated Amanda, breastless Cherie. That night that was the heart of all her nightmares, when she first knew that she had fallen so far into hell she might never climb out again.

I dream their murders. I see their ghosts. I don't know who he is.

She dreamed them still. The only thing that had changed was that now she had a face for him, the murderer, whose hair was cropped

and clean and whose eyes were small and brown and so shallow they were almost blank. She saw him often in the news, waiting for her own trial, charged with accessory to murder after the fact—just the one count, for Amanda whose body she had told them how to find. Of course she was an accessory, however strenuously Slobodski, the killer, denied it. Because, after all, how else could she have known?

She'd known she would be convicted. The plea they'd offered would have gotten her half the time—a generous one, the prosecutor said, because she had at least told them where to find Amanda. And although no one ever said as much, it had been finding Amanda that had led Bailor to the witness who'd seen the van Slobodski'd driven. That was the big break in the case, and the deal was the only way they could bring themselves to thank her—the only way short of believing her. But how could she take that deal, say she had conspired to cover up the killer's crimes, when she knew better than any but his victims just exactly what those crimes were? She couldn't, not even when he was convicted, not even when he hanged himself in his cell, not even when the dead women had left her at last, satisfied by his death.

Because of course, they hadn't really left her at all.

She still dreamed them every night.

Imagine if they were children, how much worse those dreams might be.

SHE CALLED BAILOR'S PAGER AT dawn, sitting on the bottom stair by the pay phone. A cold draft seeped under the front door and across her bare feet. She pulled her hands up her sleeves as she waited for Bailor to call her back. It took him about a minute and a half.

"Bailor."

"Do you know what you're asking me to do?"

A breath. "Emily."

"Do you?"

"I'm asking you to help me find a couple of kids."

"You're asking me to climb back down into hell."

Silence.

"Bailor?"

"Yeah."

"I lived those women's murders. Do you realize that? Can you imagine what that's like?"

"I know exactly what that's like."

"Why, because you saw their bodies?"

"I talked to their families—"

"I felt his knife!" Silence. "You really don't give a shit what happens to me, do you?"

"Do you care what happens to those kids?"

She propped her head on her knees and whispered into the phone, "Tell me you believe me."

"Tell me you'll help."

She blinked wetness from her eyes and realized it was tears. "What do you want me to do?"

BAILOR PICKED HER UP AT EIGHT, two jumbo coffees steaming on the dashboard. He looked her over critically as she got in the car and said, "That's the best you could

do?"

She did up her seat belt as he pulled away from the curb. "What'd you expect, Dior?"

Dress up, he'd said. *Wear something professional*. The "best she could do" was a second-hand pair of wool pants and her black turtleneck.

"What's it matter what I look like, anyway? You get me a job interview with your boss?"

He shot her a look over his coffee cup. "You need something of the kids', right? To do your thing? So I called the parents, told them I'm bringing over a criminal psychologist, a whaddayacallit, a victim profiler. They watch TV, they think every police department's like the FBI." He gave her another look. "Maybe they'll think you're a child genius. You look about sixteen."

Emily said nothing, drank her coffee. She could blame the caffeine for sweaty palms and a jumpy heart, but not for the gut-deep certainty that she was doing absolutely the wrong thing. She was no psychic. She'd just stumbled into a few months of hell, stumbled on through into prison, and now she'd stumbled out again and what was she doing, courting a return?

She swallowed the same mouthful of coffee twice and said, "This is nuts, Bailor, you know that, right?"

He emptied his cup and tossed it over his shoulder into the back seat. "You backing out on me, Lake?"

Yes. She couldn't say it. "No."

They were driving the road that wound uphill into the Glens. Old-fashioned frame houses, trees lining the streets.

He said, "Don't say anything,

okay? Just look intelligent and let me do the talking."

Yeah, right. Intelligent. She'd be lucky if she could manage sane. "Can I ask you something?"

He grunted.

"If this works...I mean, it isn't going to, you know that. But if it does..."

"What?"

"You going to charge me with accessory again?"

The car came to a stop. Bailor set the brake and turned off the engine. Then he said, "Nobody's going to know about this, Lake. Got it? If you get anything I'll call it an anonymous tip."

She rolled her head on the headrest and looked at him. He was scowling out the windshield. He looked tired and angry, which was okay, but he didn't look scared. It wasn't fair. She wanted him to be scared, as scared as she was.

He undid his seatbelt, opened the door. "Okay?"

She put her half-full coffee cup on the floor. Undid her belt. Got out of the car.

"These are the Levesques," Bailor told her going up the front walk. "Their kid was the second one taken. An only son." That was all he had time to say before the front door opened. The Levesques must have been watching for them.

A tall thin man and his small plump wife. Emily found it impossible to meet their eyes, and she never did get a clear picture of their faces. Mr. Levesque's hand was as damp and cold as Emily's, his wife's voice jerky as she offered them tea. Bailor said something soothing,

Emily hardly heard what. She felt like an impostor. Nothing new there, it was how she'd felt since she'd gotten out. But this was worse because the Levesques, blinded by their hope, couldn't see her for what she was.

Bailor herded her up the stairs, leaving the kid's parents to wait below. The boy's bedroom was at the end of the hall, door sealed with a yellow strip of tape. Bailor pulled the tape to dangle down one jamb and opened the door.

Just a kid's room. A twin bed with a blue quilt, a kid-sized table under a window. Plastic soldiers and a poster of Ken Griffey Jr., a baseball glove propped proudly on the bedside table. There was also a nightlight there shaped like a baseball, milky plastic that would shed just enough light to keep the corners empty. A good idea, Emily thought. I should get one of those.

Bailor cleared his throat. "So. You, uh, getting anything?"

Emily jammed her hands in her pockets and scowled at him. "Yeah," she said. "You want a cigarette, don't you?"

He scowled back. "I'll wait outside," he said, and stepped into the hall. Just before he shut the door, he said, "By the way, in case you're interested, the kid's name is Ben."

She stood for a minute, hands in her pockets, listening to the Saturday morning quiet. Someone down the block was mowing their lawn, probably for the first time that season. They should fertilize, after.

Emily shook her head, went and sat down on the bed. *You need something of the kids', right? To do your*

thing? Jesus, Bailor, how the hell would I know? I never "did" anything. They just came. She shuddered, now, remembering. She picked up Ben's baseball glove and put it on. It fit her well; his dad must have got a size he could grow into. She worked at the leather of the webbing, softening it, while she looked around. There was a picture on the table by the window, a skinny black-haired boy wearing his baseball cap backwards, Griffey-style.

A floorboard squeaked, paused, squeaked again. Bailor was pacing, impatient, wanting a cigarette. Some psychic, Emily told herself. What ex-smoker doesn't want a cigarette? She pulled off the glove and propped it back in place. The lawn mower had stopped. She got up and went to the door.

She was wrong, he wasn't pacing, just rocking on his heels. "So?" he said.

She shrugged, hoping he wouldn't see her relief.

He swore under his breath and stomped off down the hall to the stairs. "I'll let you know as soon as we have anything," he said to the parents as they opened the door. They didn't say anything to Emily, but she could feel the weight of their eyes. That terrible hope. Something she'd discovered: the dead don't hope for anything.

THE NEXT STOP WAS THE OTHER side of the Glens, the ritzier part with newer houses and a view of downtown. Bailor said, "We think he targets the classic middle-class suburban families." He made them

sound like a sub-group of criminals. "The Karsovs are professionals, she's an architect, he's a vice-president of something." He glanced at Emily. "This kind of thing can tear a family apart."

"I know."

"Yeah, I guess you saw enough of that on the street."

She clenched her teeth, hating how much he knew about her: the foster homes, the runaway years. They used that at her trial, proof she had to be dysfunctional, that she could know any number of murderers.

The Karsovs' house was a big stucco affair, set behind a three-car garage and a lawn like a fairway. The doorbell bing-bonged, starting a blur of movement behind the oval of frosted glass.

"What's his name?" Emily asked.

"Andrew Dean," Bailor said. "Andy."

The door opened, revealing a woman with curly gray hair, too old to be the mother. She ushered them into the foyer at the same time another woman came down the curving stairs, talking even before she'd reached the bottom.

"My mother came down to sit with me, Greg had to go in to work, some things just won't get done without him, can I offer you some coffee? We made cinnamon rolls this morning, they're Andy's favorite." And she started to cry.

Her mother said, "I think the detectives probably just want to see the room, Glory."

"Of course," Mrs. Karsov said. She didn't seem to notice the tears. "I'll show you the way—"

"I know where it is, Mrs.

Karsov," Bailor said gruffly. "We'll just take a look and get out of your hair."

The two women stood at the bottom of the stairs watching them climb.

BAILOR PULLED OFF THE TAPE AS before and opened the door.

A big room, a lot bigger than Ben's. A wall of plastic baskets full of toys, a futon with a Batman quilt tucked tidily under the pillows. The ceiling was painted as a blue sky with clouds. There was a picture in this room too, a school photo that showed a round freckled face under ginger hair, a grin that threatened mischief.

Bailor lingered in the doorway. "We thought maybe the perp knows the families, or at least the kids, because of the names. Andy, Ben, like he was doing them in alphabetical order. And they're only sons. But we haven't found anything else they have in common, except they both slept with nightlights on. Maybe he's a nightlight salesman. You know how many places there are to buy nightlights in the city? Forty-eight that we know of so far." He sounded discouraged, his voice rasping in his throat. "Goddamn it, I hate this case."

Emily looked at him. "You got kids, Bailor?"

He glowered at the floor between her feet. "Jeff. He had leukemia. He was ten."

She stared at him a moment, then looked away out the window. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah." He cleared his throat.

"Just do what you do," he said, and slammed the door shut.

The house was too new for the floorboards to squeak. She went over to the bed and sat. The room was empty. Nothing to say Andrew Dean wouldn't come through the door the next minute, kick off his shoes and grab the half-constructed spaceship in the corner. Relief poured through her, and a tide of guilt. Too bad she couldn't help. Too bad for those poor little boys suffering god only knew what horrors, too bad for their parents, too bad for Bailor. But okay for Emily, who had enough nightmares already. And she'd tried, right? She'd done her best. What else could she do?

To put off facing Bailor, she lay down on the bed. The clouds on the ceiling were blurred around the edges; someone had done something clever with a sponge. They probably glowed in the glimmer of the nightlight, like real clouds did just before the moon rose. Nice, Emily thought. When she'd scraped together the cash for a deposit on her own apartment, maybe she'd paint her bedroom ceiling like that. Something to gaze at when she woke up sick, cold and shaking.

She rolled over onto her side, and there he was. Andy's ghost with his half-made spaceship in the corner.

HE HAD FRECKLES ALL DOWN HIS shoulders and arms, the contrast like a tan against the white of his narrow chest. His face was solemn, a little bewildered, as if he didn't quite know why he was there. His belly button stuck out like the navel

on a navel orange. He bore no wounds, as the women had, and none of their anger. Maybe he was still so young he didn't know he should be angry.

And yet, meeting the dead boy's eyes, Emily caught a glimpse of the darkness behind them. The darkness, the filth, the pain and fear, the moment of his death—just a glimpse, but it tore open the scars where her heart used to be. She rolled off the bed and stood.

"All right," she said. "All right."

BAILOR KNEW WHEN HE SAW HER face. "Jesus," he said.

"Come on," she said.

He didn't ask. Just took the stairs at a run. In the car he said, "Where?"

She looked around. Andy was behind them, standing in the street, waiting. "Back that way."

He pulled out from the curb with a yelp of tires, spun the car around with a jerk that spilled the coffee at Emily's feet. She hardly noticed. "Go," she said.

He went.

Andy led them, showing her the turns to take, out of the city, across the river and into the farmland beyond. Fields of black furrows ready for planting, trees, farmhouses, tractor repair shops.

"What is it?" Bailor asked her. "What do you see?"

The naked boy always ahead of them, standing still.

She shook her head. "Just drive."

There were lakes out this way too, most of them ponds that watered cattle and fields. But a few were left half-wild, surrounded by

cottages and trees, rowboats on sagging docks. Andy led them down a road that skirted one of these, Pickcreek Lake, and to the mouth of a driveway.

"Here," Emily said.

Bailor drove past the driveway, parked just down the road. He turned off the engine, pulled a cell phone out of his jacket pocket, looked at it, put it back.

"Stay put," he said as he opened the door. "I'll be right back."

"Wait a minute!" She climbed out too, slithering on the edge of the ditch. "Bailor—"

"Just wait here. I can't keep you out of this if you come around and mess up the crime scene."

"But..."

But what? He was already gone, jumping the ditch to disappear among the trees.

Emily slammed her door, the sound a shock in the rural silence. Andy stood with his back to her across the ditch. His shoulder blades sharp as incipient wings under the pale, freckled skin.

"Shit," Emily said.

Andy looked back at her, his death in his eyes. She jumped the ditch and followed him through the woods.

The house at the end of the driveway sat in a small gravel clearing, a tiny sagging house full of an inhabited silence, windows curtained and dark. No sign of Bailor. Andy disappeared.

Mouth dry with fear, Emily snuck through the trees, around the house toward the lake. She was a city person, the wet mat of leaves felt treacherous under her boots.

Behind the house, the lake, a gray oval of water fringed by trees. A couple of wooden docks poked out into the water, but the houses they belonged to were hidden.

There was a dock here as well, a long crooked affair of weathered planks and old tires reaching across the marshy ground between the yard and the lake. Andy stood among straw-colored reeds, looking at his feet that made no dents in the saturated ground. That's where he was, Emily realized, shivering with cold. She'd forgotten her jacket.

So she'd found Andy. Where was Ben?

Terrified of the house's blank windows she crept around the back of the garden shed, heart in her mouth. Still no sign of Bailor. Staring around her at the trees, the lake, she leaned against the shed. It was prefabricated out of corrugated metal, cold under her shoulder, its paint white and new. New. An old house with no garden and a brand new garden shed? Her heart lurched back into her chest and started to pound.

The shed had a door at either end. She had seen without really seeing that the doors facing the house were open, showing the line of rakes and shovels, the rideable mower in the center of the floor. A mower for a gravel yard.

Goddamn it, where was Bailor? Emily leaned against the door and almost fell when it slid quietly open on oiled tracks. The floor was rough cement. Pale light poured through the shed: tools, mower, garden chairs. No boy.

But he had to be here. Why else

the shed full of useless tools? Emily walked over to the mower, careless of being seen, and then froze. Her foot coming down had made a hollow thump. She looked down. At first it just looked like the same concrete as the rest of the floor, but then she saw the grain and realized it was plywood painted gray. She dropped to her knees and looked again. Hinges and, under the mower, a padlock through a hasp. "Hey!"

The shout stopped her heart. She looked up to see the man standing in the back door of the house. He was in a sweatshirt and jeans, half his jaw white with shaving cream, a razor in his hand. He had pale hair in a crew cut, pale eyes that looked lashless and raw. Fear in his face, that mounted into fury.

"Hey! Get away from there!" He started down the stairs. "That's private property!"

Emily threw herself at the mower. It started sweet and quick, the rattle of its engine loud in the metal shed. She drove it forward onto the gravel, left it running as she scrambled off again. He was at the other door of the shed, still shouting, the neck of his shirt white with shaving cream.

"Get out of here!" he shouted. "Get out before I call the police!"

"I am the police."

Bailor, his footsteps covered by the noise of the mower. The blond man spun, whole body braced with shock.

Bailor's problem. Emily snatched a rake off the wall, jammed the end of the handle through the padlock hasp and heaved. Muscles honed

over weeks of digging strained until they burned. The hasp didn't budge. She wedged the rake handle further through the hasp and heaved again, using her legs and back as well as arms. There was shouting behind her, a scuffle half drowned by the mower's faltering engine. The rake handle digging into her collarbone, blood pounding in her temples, sweat stinging in her eyes.

A high shout, "No!" The crack of breaking wood.

The hasp came loose.

She threw the rake aside, hauled up the trap door. Blackness down below, a reek of sewer and mud. Bailor was at her side, panting.

"No ladder," she said.

"Here." There was one in the corner, aluminum, new. He dropped it into the pit.

The mower stuttered and died. Silence.

"Ben?" Emily kneeled at the edge of the hole. "Ben?"

And from below, a tiny voice: "No."

Bailor was already on the ladder, climbing down.

A SKINNY LITTLE KID, BLACK WITH filth and bruises. Eyes clenched shut against the light of day. It was Ben. He'd denied his presence there, not his name. That one *No* was all he'd say. But he was alive.

Emily pulled off her shirt and wiped him clean while he crouched, shivering, on the floor of the shed. She shivered, too, in her undershirt. Bailor handed her his jacket. For the first time she saw his gun, black and snub in its holster on his belt.

She wrapped Ben in the jacket and then wrapped her arms around him too, looking over his head towards the house. In the space between shed and steps lay the blond man. He was on his back, arms flung wide, legs twisted. The front of his sweatshirt was dark with blood.

The crack that she'd thought was the plywood breaking.

He wasn't dead. As she stared, his hand weakly moved towards the hole in his chest. Ben shivered steadily in her arms.

"Jesus, Bailor," she said.

He looked down at her. "Yeah," he said. "The paperwork's gonna be hell."

THEY CARRIED THE BOY TO Bailor's car and laid him curled in the back seat, then stood together on the side of the road, waiting for his backup and the ambulance to arrive. Emily shivering in her white undershirt.

"What did you touch?" Bailor asked her.

It took her a minute to understand. "The shed door, in back. The mower steering. The padlock. The

rake."

He nodded, looking wearier than ever. "I'll go back, wipe your prints. Keep you out of this, like I said. You can hitch a ride into town."

She looked at him. "Bailor..."

He looked off down the road. "He was carrying a straight razor. Did you see it? I didn't think anybody used those anymore." He shrugged. "I'll get shit for not calling backup, but nothing worse. Believe me, with this guy, nothing worse."

Emily nodded, wiping her dirty hands on her jeans. Her left palm stung. She looked at it and saw she'd torn a callus.


Bailor sucked in his breath. Looking up she saw him staring at the scar on her wrist, the neat red line with the staple holes to either side, like the track of a lizard in the sand.

He met her eyes. "Listen," he said.

She shoved her fists in her pockets and shrugged. "Not your fault."

"Emily." A beat. "I won't ask you again." Another beat. "I promise."

They both knew he was lying.

But it was nice of him to say. 

The Other Dead

Catherine MacLeod

THIS IS HOW YOU SAY YOU LOVE ME:

Blood on the wall like sheet music. Bone jellied soft as a kiss. Sonnets written with a razor. I've received all your love letters with no way to return them.

But I'll think of one. I swear it every thirty-one days.

At 1:00 this morning I swore again. I stepped around the cops and the M.E.'s photographer. "Hey, Jake, what've we got?"

"The usual." Ah. Medium height, fair skin, copper blonde. All your kills look like me.

Once they're reassembled.

"Who was she?"

"Marna Gesner. Thirty-five, single, property lawyer. Lanigan's in the bedroom."

"Thanks." I left him crouching for a close shot of the victim's face. I circled the apartment, waiting, looking for a darkness on the edge of my sight, a flutter like the quick shadow of a bird. One of those peripheral motions we learn to ignore.

That's you.

But no sign of you this time, only what Jake called the usual—no mark of a struggle, no prints worth mentioning, words of devotion staining the carpet red.

More usual: my partner Lanigan, watching as if the body parts were the best sex he'd ever had. I, who'd looked at them and seen an act of love, said nothing. There's a fine line between the crazed and their captors, and all the time I've been the width of that line behind you, Lanigan's been behind me.

It's love of a kind.

He said, "You'd think he'd at least kill them at a decent hour."

"Maybe he did. No one gave me a time of death. Anyway, you know the old saying."

"No rest for the wicked? I invented that one."

"They through in here?" He nodded. I took a paperback from the nightstand. "She was studying *feng-shui*."

"Excuse me?"

"Arranging possessions to promote health and prosperity."

"She didn't read enough of it."

"No." I followed him out. "Who found her?"

"Security. This guy Max Purcell, he had the office beside hers. He said she didn't have any meetings yesterday, so no one cared that she missed work, but it wasn't like her not to call in. He phoned a couple of times, and when she didn't answer he decided to come by after work."

"At midnight?"

"No rest for the wicked."

"Was he a close friend?"

"She didn't have close friends. The neighbors say she kept to herself."

We stood back as she was carried out. And carried out. And carried out. I touched Jake's arm. "Be seeing you."

"No doubt," he said darkly.

Lanigan stepped over the chalk lines. "Sometimes I have to remind myself everyone owes the world a death."

I said, "You owe, you pay."

"You say that a lot. What is it, your family motto?"

Yes: *Ru taya, ru sai*. It translates from a language no longer spoken.

With her body gone there wasn't much of Marna left. No plants, no photos, no plates in the sink. I looked in the fridge. OJ, one egg, anonymous noodle casserole.

"So what about the security cameras in the elevators? Assuming

he took one."

Lanigan said, "They're in the stairwells, too. I sent someone down for the tapes."

"Got them." I turned. The woman was young, wearing jeans. Her brown hair was cut in a wispy cap.

"Giada Breakstone, meet Kary Bennett. Kary was just assigned to the case."

I said, "Who did you tick off?"

Her eyes were bluer than mine. Her smile didn't reach them. "What kind of name is Giada?"

"Italian for jade."

"Get this—Kary thinks Angel went out the living room window."

She said, "The one in the bedroom's too small."

Lanigan sighed. "It's eight stories to the roof, past eight picture windows, and twelve to the ground. That's a hell of a risk, even for a nut. And we know he didn't fly away like a bat." He narrowed his eyes. "You *don't* think that, do you?"

"That's enough." My head ached. There was a fist in the small of my back. "They're waiting to seal the door."

He waved Kary ahead of him. "After you, Kolchak."

I could smell blood even after the door was taped. You don't have to keep saying you love me—the morgue has reminders on file.

"Hey, Giada, you think our guy's a vampire?"

"Shut up, Lanigan."

He laughed. Kary blushed. I didn't answer the question.

BECAUSE I DON'T KNOW. YOU ARE *alsh'emah*, debt unto death. My

responsibility, my prey. What else you might be is irrelevant.

I tell the director just enough to keep me in the investigation. I don't say the gore is for me; the murders are foreplay; Gillian Ray's death was the start of the mating dance.

I still dream that first murder. I see meat and scrimshaw. The morning after a kill is the worst. The other dead are still in my office, their photos on the wall, their faces mine. Me disarmed. Me with my hands tied.

And now a photo of Marna: me with my heart in my throat.

Cute.

Only Kary sat for the Monday meeting. My coworkers waited quietly.

"Anything new?" I counted thirty seconds. "See you later."

Kary looked up from her notebook. "That's it?"

"That's it." One question, one answer—we call it the weekly briefing. "You've read the file?"

"Yes."

Then she knows that you got your name by throwing Evie Walker through a plaster wall, leaving a shape like an angel. That you're presumed to be a nocturnal male with an interest in the occult—your killing cycle suggests ritual. That because of the time and effort involved in finding a suitable victim and planning her death, you have no steady job but considerable income, possibly investments.

She knows we have a partial footprint that means nothing. That a smashed mirror in Jane Callwood's bedroom sent our counselor, Monroe, into ecstasies of paperwork;

and a thumbprint from her ring showed you've never worked in a government office.

You love to tease. Your case file lends a whole new meaning to the words *reasonable assumption*.

Kary said, "There's not one useful piece of information in it."

I smiled. "So now you know what we know."

She left and I sat in her chair, wanting coffee, craving aspirin. Keeping my face turned away from the door: I'm sure the urge to kill was plain on my face. They're out there trying to find a pattern, and the only one who might ever put it together is Lanigan.

You shed blood every thirty-one days because *I* do.

You flirt.

"Giada?"

"Hey, Lanigan."

"You look like hell."

"Tell me what I don't know."

"Okay." And I knew it before he said, "We got something."

THE FIRST BREAKSTONE OWED HIS patron a favor. Killing you was the payment.

I know when our women took over the hunt, why the search for good breeders made us outcast, how we hide our children from you. But no one knows what favor Breakstone begged us for.

He assumed an *alsh'emah*, hereditary debt, passed down until it could be paid once and for all. Seventy generations later, there's no walking away from it. You came looking for me because it's lonely among strangers, and the Breakstones are the only ones who know

you well. We're all you've had for a long time.

I'm all you have now.

"You with me?"

"I'm with you."

Lanigan flipped the microtape into the recorder. "She was dictating a memo to her secretary. Listen." He thumbed *play*. A small storm rumbled from the speaker. Dry limbs crackled; wind shrieked in the eaves; hot rain hammered the windows.

Then I hear myself say, "Damn."

"Yeah."

I looked past Lanigan at the other dead. At the end of the tape were sounds too indistinct to be called words. The tone of your voice; a cello in the winter. What blasphemies did you whisper?

Endearments aren't the first thing I imagine dripping off your tongue.

"Giada, you okay?"

"Yes." No. I'm the first Breakstone to hear your voice and live. "This was careless."

"Very. It was under the couch. I'm thinking maybe she was sitting on the floor when he attacked and it got kicked there."

"Maybe." If Lanigan thinks so, almost certainly. The tape ended and clicked into automatic rewind. Fifteen minutes of audio spooled in eight quiet seconds. It would have been impossible to hear over the sounds of dismemberment.

I said, "So we know how it happened."

"But not how he got in."

"Nothing from the security tapes?"

"No." I imagined the facts turning in his head like rats on a wheel.

We both know that what you believe at four a.m. you wouldn't touch at noon. But the truth depends on the time of day—the *sky is blue* is only true till sundown.

"You look pale."

"I feel pale."

"Did you eat breakfast?"

"I couldn't."

He stroked my hair. "I know."

I've never met his wife. She is, Lanigan says, a tough, good-humored redhead. It's what he doesn't say about her that intrigues me. You have to wonder about a woman mad enough to love Lanigan.

But even though our relationship stays here, it doesn't lack for intimacy. He knows I have clean underwear in my file drawer; I know he keeps a mickey in his. I know he loves the smell of blood.

I don't think he knows I love you.

I said, "Are you going to lunch?"

"No, I'm waiting on the space cadet." I grinned. Kary. "She took a copy of the tape. She thinks she can clean it up, maybe get a few words."

"Good." Not good. What did you say?

On my way out I met Martin Chen with his nose in a phone book. He said, "Have you seen today's paper?"

"I'm not even sure what day this is."

"They say we're sitting on our hands."

I sighed. "Marty, let it go." How vocal would our critics be in the face of your love? I tapped the book. "What've you got?"

"A list of suspects. Do *you* have an alibi?"

"Of course I do. I just didn't ask his name."

That cracked him up.

I *DIDN'T* ASK.

He said, "I know why you're here."

"I doubt that."

"Same reason I am."

I thought, You need an alibi for tonight's murder?

"You're hunting." The bartender didn't quite laugh.

He had me.

"It's not a bad place," he said between beers, "but you wouldn't be here if you had someone to go home to, right?"

What could I say? "Right."

I thought of Marna's apartment, empty of life, devoid of joy. If I can't kill you, that's what Lanigan will find. No pictures of my daughters, no half-done crosswords. No silk stockings. No postcards from Lin.

I miss her. She was old when I was a child; ancient when she taught me to kill; withered when she brought me the father of my twins. I saw him twice. I saw my children once. The day I got back on my feet she vanished with them, leaving me to engage you. I think she must have been a Breakstone.

I remember her drilling my lessons into me, telling me *Never attack in anger*. Teaching me family history and weaponry. Saying *If he can predict your next move, you're lost*. She trained my mother to hunt you. If she's alive, she's training my girls. She did the best she could. It was love of a kind.

I said, "I had someone to go

home to once."

"Me, too."

"So what am I hunting?"

"Look around. Everyone here's so lonely they can taste it. They're looking for the one person who can end it all."

I remember the smell of his skin, the warmth of his mouth. Cracking my head repeatedly on the dome light of his car.

Learning barroom wisdom.

We were meant to be together, you and I, no matter that one of us will die. You're my reason for living. Perhaps your penchant for committing murder in the night is not so different from mine for committing little suicides. But you owe me for the daughters I wouldn't recognize, and the solace I've taken in more parking lots than I can remember.

Ru taya, ru sai.

His eyes glowed in the wash of passing headlights. I twisted in his hands and thought of the other dead. I know about taking comfort—any comfort—where you can find it. Sometimes our monsters slip the leash. Sometimes we *need*.

I heard my pager through a distant yowling I knew was mine, and left him rumped and winded in the backseat. I found a payphone, and looked at the sky as the call went through. The stars that cast those lights are dead now. The night was full of beautiful ghosts.

"Lanigan, where are you?"

I've always lived with ghosts. You're just one more.

BECAUSE OF YOU, I'VE SEEN TOO much night. I've never planted a

garden or learned to play piano. I've never cooked dinner for my children.

If I didn't love you so much I'd hate you more than I do.

I remember our first kiss.

Jake looked at me over Annie Donne's remains. "You sure you don't know her?"

Because she looked like me. When you were courting my mother, you killed tall brunettes.

"I'm sure."

"Giada."

"Hey, Lanigan." Annie's taste ran toward leather and chrome. Her blood was Rorschach on the wall. It was the only bright spot in the room. "How did she pay for this?"

"Real estate."

Jake knelt for a shot of her face. You *flickered*.

A darkness on the edge of my sight. A flutter like the quick shadow of a bird. I snapped my head back. Jake said, "What?"

Peripheral motion unseen by a roomful of cops. "Nothing. What've you got?"

The usual. No sign of a fight, no definite prints, the neighbors knew sweet zip-all. Lanigan's eyes were glued to the corpse. He chided, "You needed to ask?"

Your lips moved across mine like frost. Your copper tongue burned in my mouth. A shock sizzled through my hair.

A dim shimmer danced before me and was gone.

"Giada?" Lanigan's hand pulled mine from my eyes. "You look as if you're having visions."

"And you know what that looks like, do you?"

He did. I knew there'd be more slaughterhouses.

Gillian, Lucy, Annie, Jane, Evie, Chelsea, Marna.

I drank styrofoam-flavored tea on the agency steps, and thought about Marna. In the end, all she had was your embrace, and she was lonely enough to welcome it. She was me. But I have an excuse. I wonder if she did, or if she was just afraid.

The sun was warm on my face. If the old stories are true, you can't get me in the daylight. Of course, if they're true, I also have to shoot your eyes out. I can. No Breakstone has ever killed, but it's not because we didn't try.

"Hello."

"Hey, Bennett."

"The tape hasn't cleaned up yet."

"Give it time." She frowned. "We still have thirty days." And I can only spare so much grief. I understand her frustration; I joined the agency to get fast information and backup, but thank God I'd already learned patience.

"I've been wondering... I know we don't have a motive," she said. "But—" She scuffed her shoe over the step. "—don't you think we should see Angel's trigger if anyone does?"

"Why?"

"We don't understand his procedure, but he can learn about ours. We do things exactly the same way every time he strikes. We're as ritual-bound as he is. Shouldn't that give us insight?"

If he can predict your next move you're lost.

Sometimes lovers get lazy. Too much anticipation can wear. It was

thoughtless of you to miss the tape. You've been ahead of us for so long you don't think about how far anymore. Perhaps I learned patience too well; I've grown too used to waiting on you.

Nothing kills the romance like routine.

ALSH'EMAH. PAY OR DIE TRYING. I've paid too much, and not enough. I pray in my family's first tongue. *Let my daughters be spared his love.*

Someday there'll be Breakstone children who've never heard of you. Whose biggest debt is their student loan. Who outgrow their fear of the dark.

Who don't pray for the strength to unlove.

I tapped on Lanigan's door. "Anything?"

"We haven't found Marna's relatives. The director's excited about the tape. In response to this morning's editorial, he's issued a statement saying we expect a breakthrough soon."

"Did he say it with a straight face?"

Lanigan grinned and ruffled my hair, cut in short spikes and rinsed brown. "Is this how you spent your lunch hour? It's about time." He opened the file drawer and got the bottle of scotch. It was in the rack between *Schuyler* and *Shaw*.

I held two cups as he poured. "I spent an hour with Dr. Monroe. Missing the tape was a big mistake. He says Angel's becoming self-destructive."

"Did he say what might finish him?"

"That would be too easy."

But I know, starting with my haircut. Anything you don't expect. Whatever gets your attention. No more ritual.

Except one.

Lanigan raised his drink. "To Marna."

"To Marna."

Seven toasts so far. There was no one else to drink to their memory.

I know you'll end this when you're ready, but I hate marking the calendar. I hate scotch. And while I know I can't fight you from a padded cell, I hate lying to Lanigan.

He walked me to my car. Kary unlocked hers a couple of spaces over. She made a snipping motion with two fingers. "Your hair looks nice," she said politely, and you *flickered*. She was haloed in darkness.

I got it. The next kill would still look like me.

I know it's frightening to give in to love. But I'm glad you've made your move. We both know the rules of engagement.

Ready when you are.

Lanigan said, "You smell rain?"

"Yes."

"She finds you cold."

"So do you."

"Yes, but I find it endearing. Did Monroe even have any hints for tripping Angel, or is it all up to us?"

"Guess."

"Great. It'll have to be original, whatever it is. This guy wasn't born yesterday."

OFFICER DOWN. THE CALL CAME AT seven.

Blood like roses on her night-

gown. Hair like rusted feathers on the floor. Rain blew through the broken window. Someone had bagged the paving stone.

Jake looked up from his crouch beside Kary.

"Somebody shot her eyes out."

I regarded the kill. There was still a resemblance.

Me with my eyes wide open.

A stone walk circled the bungalow. Lanigan was out back with a couple of cops.

"Who called it in?"

"The milkman." On the step, two cartons; one chocolate, one 2%. "I don't think the shooter left the path. Just drifted the rock through the window and fired."

The older cop said, "Sharpshooter."

"Yes."

He looked miserable in the rain. "You know, hair, fibers, in this we probably won't get much."

"I know."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you."

I walked away. We have a lot to answer for, but a promise is a promise, even if I'm not the one who made it. When you come looking for Kary, I'll be here. The house will be sealed. We'll be alone.

Time's up.

Read the writing on the wall.

You owe me an embrace. I owe the patron your death. *Ru taya, ru sai.*

I look forward to hearing the toxic nocturne of your voice.

Tell me you love me. 🍁

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ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

JAMES BEVERIDGE (illustration for "Understanding") is still playing with pixels, although his mainstay is still airbrushing vehicles. His cut scene background work last year for Prelusion's (prelusion.com) adventure title, "Gilbert Goodmate and the Mushroom of Phungoria," came out in March 2000. Until he's requested to join in any other reindeer games, he's going to keep pushing paint on the public's ocular orifices.

JOHN CRAIG ("Dance of the Dead") is an insurance underwriter who lives in southern California with his wife, daughter and two dogs. Besides "Dance of the Dead," the insomniac character Joe Horn has appeared—online—in *The Three Lobed Burning Eye* (www.owlsoup.com/3LBE/3LBEmain.html) and *The Orphic Chronicle* (www.orphic-chronicle.com/). John thinks that Mr. Horn is really a very nice fellow once you get to know him.

A.M. DE GIORGIO ("There Ain't No Strings On Me") is a software developer living and working in Montreal. When nobody's looking, he sneaks away and writes to recover his sanity. Of the handful of stories sent out into the world, this is his first professional sale.

LAR DESOUZA (illustrations for "Beauty and its Beast" and "The Dream House") is a professional cartoonist and illustrator in Ontario. He has been active in the SF community for many years and is known for his award-winning media cartoons. He is currently breaching the mainstream markets as a caricaturist.

MICI GOLD ("Hiding" and "Speed") is a Toronto poet, botanist and mystic. Her work has appeared in *Parsec*, *TransVersions* and *Northern Frights 4*.

MELISSA HARDY ("The Dream House") works as a Communications Specialist and, from 7 to 8 each morning, as a writer of fiction. Hardy has published two novels, *A Cry of Bees* (Viking) and *Constant Fire* (Oberon). In 1995 she won the Journey Prize for the best piece of short fiction to be published in Canada a given year; more recently, she was a finalist in the 1999 Western Magazine Foundation Awards. Her work has been included in a number of anthologies, including *Best Canadian Short Stories*, and is scheduled to appear in Houghton-Mifflin's *Best American Short Stories of 1999*. She has just signed a deal with Alfred A. Knopf Canada for a book of short stories entitled *The Uncharted Heart*, which is slated to appear in the Spring of 2001. Her story "Metallica" appeared in the Spring 1999 issue of *On Spec*.

TERRY HAYMAN ("Millipede Lessons") lives and writes on the slopes of Vancouver's north shore. No giant millipedes, but lots of risk-takers, young and old.

JAMES KEENAN ("The Draft Dodger") is an Ottawa-born engineer who switched from electronics to nuclear medicine. He has sold four science fiction stories so far, two to *Aboriginal SF* and two to *Spaceways*. "Draft Dodger" is his first printed publication.

CATHERINE MACLEOD ("The Other Dead") has published short fiction in *On Spec*, *TransVersions*, *Horizons SF*, and *Talebones*. Being disintegrated makes her very angry.

JOY HEWITT MANN ("The Quiet Village") has been writing for ten years with literary poetry and fiction appearing in such journals as *The Malahat Review*, *Queen's Quarterly* and

The Fiddlehead. In 1997 she received the Leacock Award for Poetry. Her fantasy and SF have appeared in *The Roswell Review*, *Bardic Runes*, *Strange Wonderland*, *Whetstone*, and previously in *On Spec* ("The Spanish Gardener," Spring 1995). Her first short story collection, *Clinging to Water*, will be published by Boheme Press, Toronto, this Spring. Joy lives in Spencerville, Ontario—with her husband and three children—where she runs a large junkstore.

L.E. MODESITT, JR. ("Understanding") is better known as a fantasy and science fiction author, especially of the "Reduce" books. His latest novel, *Magi'i of Cyador*, was published by Tor in April, and the next, *Scion of Cyador*, will be released this coming September. A science fiction novel, tentatively entitled *The Octagonal Raven*, is scheduled for February 2001. He has also written *The Spellsong Cycle* of fantasy novels, for which he owes a great debt to his wife Carol Ann, who is indeed a beautiful soprano and the head of the opera program at Southern Utah University. Having survived eight children and previous spouses, they create and manage chaos in Cedar City, Utah.

HOLLY PHILLIPS ("No Such Thing as an Ex-Con") lives a sheltered existence in a garret overlooking the Columbia River. She has the minimum basic requirement of housecats (one) and books (about a million) and in spite of not having published her first three novels (yet), she is hard at work on number four.

VOL RANGER ("Ice Crimes") is a genre fiction writer living on an 1800s homestead with an abandoned gold mine and a vintage apple orchard in a redwood forest in Santa Cruz County, California. The area is the last vestige of the tie-dye universe and makes you think of wood stoves, foggy mornings, scrambling down rock cliffs to tiny beaches, and nude hot tub parties. It's a place that encourages eccentricity, diversity, and even perversity. Luckily, Vol fits right in. Her most recent published story was "Blood Brother" in *Vision Quests* (Angelus Press 1997). She's working on a murder mystery set at the annual Fungus Fair.

RONN SUTTON (illustration for "There Ain't No Strings On Me") is currently penciling his seventeenth assignment on *Elvira, Mistress of the Dark* for American company Claypool Comics. He resides in Ottawa with writer/artist Janet L. Hetherington and recently did a number of color and b&w illustrations for the December/January issue of *Saturday Night* magazine.

EDO VAN BELKOM's ("Beauty and its Beast") short fiction has won both the Aurora and the Bram Stoker Award, the latter for a story co-written with David Nickle and published in the pages of *On Spec* ("Rat Food," Spring 1998). He is the author of the short story collection *Death Drives a Semi*, the nonfiction books *Northern Dreamers* and *Writing Horror*, and the novels *Lord Soth* and *Teeth*, which is to be published in 2000 by Meisha Merlin. His website is located at www.vanbelkom.com. ✱

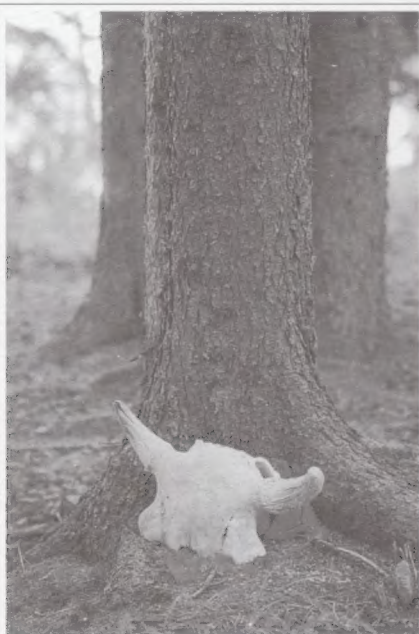
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